



ACTION

STORIES

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**SEÑORITA
SCORPION**

**THE CURSE OF
MONTEZUMA**

COMPLETE WESTERN NOVEL
by LES SAVAGE, JR.

Colds? Sore Throat?

*Let LISTERINE ANTISEPTIC
get after the germs
that go with them!*

The delightful Listerine Antiseptic gargle taken early and often may spare you a nasty siege of trouble. Here is why:

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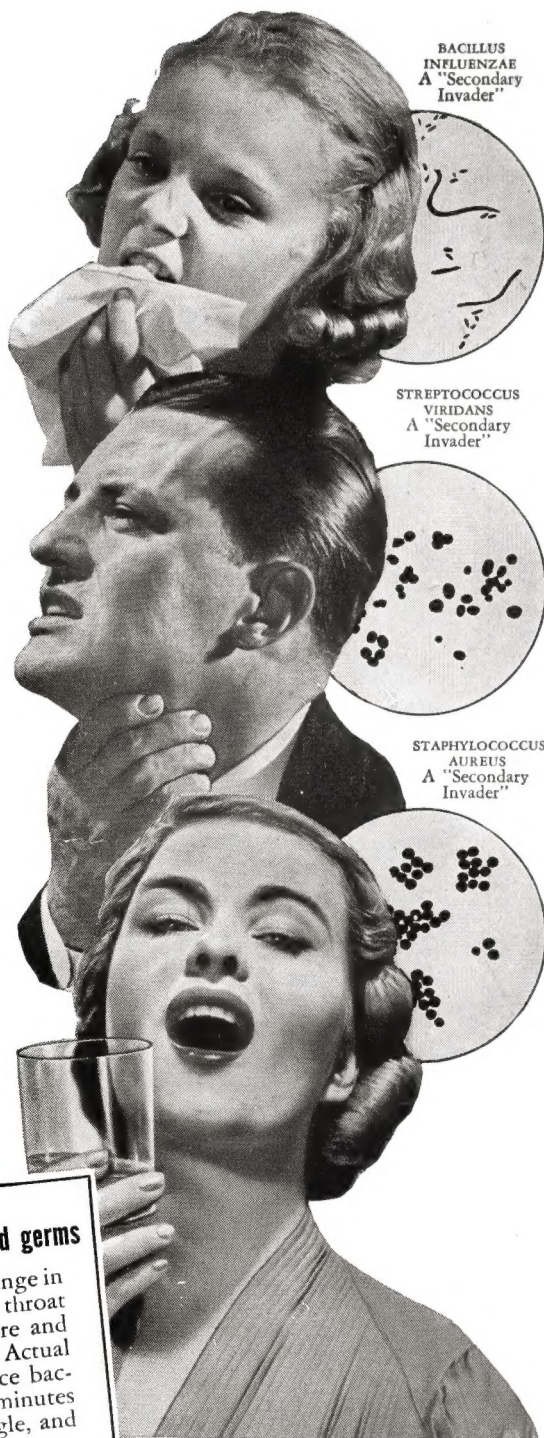
BEFORE



AFTER

Note how Listerine Antiseptic reduced germs

At left is illustrated the height of range in germ reductions on mouth and throat surfaces noted in test cases before and after gargling Listerine Antiseptic. Actual tests showed reductions of surface bacteria ranging up to 96.7% fifteen minutes after the Listerine Antiseptic gargle, and up to 80% one hour after.



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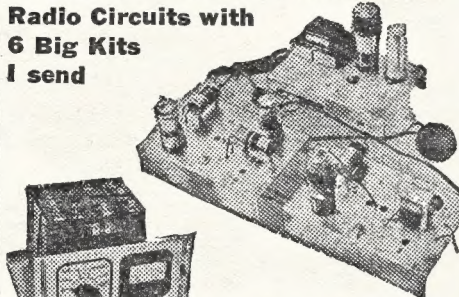


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BREED OF BATTLE

by William Heuman



THE BATTLE OF NEW ORLEANS
THE THIRD OF A BRILLIANT SERIES

Three nations fought for Louisiana Territory, and facing them was only Andy Jackson, the backwoods lawyer, whose rallying cry had brought a rabble army to stem the invaders—and to fight the traitors from within.

THEY CAME SINGLY, and in pairs—lean, hawk-faced men in buckskin shirts, fringed leggins and coonskin caps; they came in from the back country carrying their long-barreled Lancaster rifles, powder horns hanging from leathern thongs slung over their shoulders, bullet pouches filled with spherical lead balls, forty-five to the pound.

Kirby Dall, attorney in the town of Greenvale, Tennessee, sat on the rude long bench outside the "*Black Stallion*" tavern, a long rifle across his knees and a polishing cloth in his hands.

"The Legislature," big Sol Cannavan grinned, "can call 'em till they're blue in the face. When old Andy gives the word, everybody's here."

Kirby smiled also. He stood up, a tall dark-haired man with gray eyes, the buckskin shirt tight across his broad shoulders. Like the other frontiersmen, he wore a coonskin cap and soft deer-skin mocassins, of Choctaw manufacture.

"The backwoodsmen know," he said quietly, "when Andrew Jackson calls them, it means a fight."

"The Red Sticks," Cannavan asked, "or the red coats? You know which, Kirby?"

The young lawyer shook his head. He

stood next to the giant blond-haired Cannavan, his own six feet seemingly dwarfed by the big man's four extra inches and two hundred and thirty pounds of muscle. Major-General Andrew Jackson had called out the Tennessee militia and they were reporting for duty, lining up at Captain Jason Donald's table, set outside the tavern, lining up in every town and hamlet for a hundred and fifty miles around.

Kirby watched them giving their names to the red-haired, freckle-faced man at the desk. There were lone hunters and farmers, school teachers, tradesmen, and he himself a lawyer, having just passed his examinations at the bar.

"This damn war," Cannavan growled, "ain't goin' the way I like it, Kirby. If Andy had charge o' thing back east you'd see some action."

Kirby nodded. He'd grown up in Greenvale with Cannavan; the big blue-eyed man voiced the convictions of the entire state—probably of the whole west. The war had started in 1812 and had dragged on for two years. Detroit had fallen into British hands; there had been a few victories by the American navy, but it was rumored a tremendous invasion fleet was in Chesapeake Bay with an army of regulars ready to march on Washington.

"It takes this country a little while to get organized," Kirby said slowly. "When it does, nothing will stop us."

Cannavan shrugged. "You're a lawyer," he stated. "You read more books than I do, Kirby. Maybe you know better, but if they'd give Andy a bigger job than holdin' back the Creek Nation and fightin' renegades and spies, this war would be over a heap quicker."

Kirby Dall watched the three men trotting down the road toward the recruiting post. They rode fine Tennessee horses in contrast to their dirty, grease-blackened buckskins. All three carried long rifles across the pommels of their saddles, and had Indian tomahawks in their belts.

Sol Cannavan swore under his breath. "Speakin' o' the devil," he murmured, "an' renegades! You tell me, Kirby, where Ty Gurlap got that animal."

The young lawyer's jaw tightened as the three men dismounted. The leader was a powerful man with tremendous shoulders and long arms; he had a heavy bull-dog

jaw covered by a three days' growth of black beard. His eyes were slanted, greenish in color, and he stared at the group near the tavern with open insolence.

"I always figured Gurlap was workin' with the Creeks," Cannavan scowled. "They say he married a Red Stick woman an' he's been hangin' around their villages."

Kirby nodded. Gurlap had a vague reputation around Greenvale. He'd lived with the Creeks when they were a friendly people and before Tecumseh and Weathersford stirred them up—before the British sent them arms to keep the frontiersmen busy in the south and west.

"He ain't likin' you because o' that horse-stealin' charge," Cannavan said flatly. "If he comes with us, Kirby, you better keep a knife handy at night."

Kirby Dall shrugged. In his first case in Greenvale he'd been hired to prosecute Gurlap on charge of stealing several thoroughbred animals from the plantation of John Miller. There had not been sufficient evidence to imprison Gurlap and he'd gone free, but he hadn't forgotten the tall young man who had addressed the jury.

Gurlap was staring at them now, recognition coming into his eyes. The two men with him were typical border ruffians. One had a livid scar down the right cheek; the other, the tallest of the three, walked with a slight limp, tawny black hair protruding from beneath a bearskin cap.

Gurlap reported to the recruiting officer and then strolled toward the tavern. He paused before the lawyer.

"Ain't forgot your law books have you, mister?" he grated.

KIRBY DALL stared at him. He had been convinced at the trial that Gurlap was a thief, and he'd tried hard to get the conviction.

"I like your horse, Gurlap," he murmured. "Raise him on your own plantation?"

"I reckon where I get my horses ain't none o' your business, mister," the horse-thief snarled. "Tend to your law books."

The man with the scar spoke up in a sneering voice. "Mebbe we kin steer him into Weathersford, Ty, an' he'll lose that pretty topknot."

Sol Cannavan took a step nearer. "I wouldn't put it past you," the giant growled.

Gurlap grinned. "Always keep a big man near you," he said to Kirby. "You do the fightin' with your mouth." With that he walked into the tavern.

"Some day," Cannavan stated grimly, "I'm twistin' his neck around so he kin see what's in the rear when he's walkin' ahead."

"Stay out of it," Kirby told him. "This is my fight." He noticed Captain Donald motioning to him from the desk and he went over. The red-haired man was just finishing with the last recruit.

"You know those three men, Kirby?" he asked when they were alone. "I saw them talk with you." In civilian life, Donald had a farm in the county adjacent to Greenvale. Kirby had known him a long time.

"We had Gurlap on a horse stealing charge," Kirby reminded him. "You remember the case, Captain."

Captain Donald scratched his chin and his eyes hardened. "I don't like his kind in the militia," he said grimly. "They enlisted as scouts."

Kirby Dall nodded. "Better keep an eye on them," he advised. "Gurlap used to be pretty friendly with the Creeks." He paused. "I presume we're fighting the Creeks, Captain?"

Donald smiled. "Jackson issued orders to assemble. We're to meet at Martin's Landing in a week. I think we'll be marching against the Red Sticks, Kirby."

"Most of the men wish it were the British," Kirby stated. "They feel the war would end sooner."

Donald grinned. "They could be right," he chuckled. "The regular army doesn't seem to be doing much." He stared at the groups of men hanging around the tavern. "It's our job to protect the frontier, Kirby," he said, "and Jackson realizes it. The Creeks are over a thousand strong and the British are backing them; they've been striking at the settlements to the south and they might be moving north."

Kirby watched the Captain close his book and stuff it in a leather bag.

"We have over a hundred men in our sector," he said. "I believe we can leave in the morning." He glanced apprehensively toward the tavern. "I'll be at Tom Planter's house in town," he said. "If anything happens let me know."

"Most of them will stay sober," Kirby grinned. He watched the tall captain swing across the green and then he went back to Sol Cannavan. They listened to the gales of laughter from inside the tavern.

"Some of 'em will be havin' big heads tomorrow," the giant growled, "but they'll march anyway. When Andy tells 'em to move, they'll go right into hell."

A carriage driven by two bay horses rolled along the road a dozen yards away. The carriage was open and they could see a dark-complexioned man in a black hat and bottle green coat sitting in the rear seat with a lady. The gentleman had a ruffled white shirt, frills at the cuffs and a flowered vest.

"Looks like one o' them Frenchmen from New Orleans," Cannavan said distastefully.

Kirby Dall was looking at the girl. The carriage had stopped and she was pointing to one of the three horses Ty Gurlap had brought with him. The animal, a black with four white feet, was grazing at the end of a tether line.

"Know 'em?" Cannavan asked. "That's a carriage from the big Ralston place down the river."

KIRBY shook his head. He'd seen the Ralston carriages on the roads and in Greenvale, but the girl, and the gentleman in the green coat, were strangers to him. She was dark-skinned like her escort; her eyes were dark also, under long eyelashes. She was dressed in white, accentuating the olive complexion; at the moment she was very excited.

The gentleman in the green coat was leaning forward, mouth a little tight. He had long sideburns and a wisp of black mustache which made him seem slightly older than he was.

"I'm thinkin' they recognize that animal Gurlap brought in," Cannavan grinned. "Maybe we got somethin' on that horse thief now, Kirby."

The gentleman in the coach stepped down just as Ty Gurlap appeared at the door of the tavern. Kirby Dall heard the frontiersman's low exclamation as the man in the green coat walked over to the horse and examined it thoroughly.

Gurlap strode down the path, followed by his two henchmen. He'd left his rifle



Cannavan and Kirby were hemmed in by the redskins.

in the tavern, but his right hand lingered on the head of the tomahawk stuck through his belt.

Kirby followed them slowly; he heard Sol Cannavan spit on his hands.

"Maybe somethin' will come out o' this," the giant chuckled.

The gentleman from the coach looked at Gurlap steadily as he strode up.

"Your horse?" he asked in perfect English.

"Damn right," Gurlap swore.

The dark man's lip twitched. "You have a bill of sale?" he said softly. "The young lady seems to recognize the animal as one belonging to Mr. Joseph Ralston. She rode the horse but a few days ago."

Gurlap grinned at his two companions. "I ain't got a bill o' sale," he chuckled, "seein' as how I raised this horse from a colt."

The gentleman in green flicked a speck of dust from his coat. "I should like to see your commanding officer," he said.

Gurlap slipped the tomahawk from his belt and held it under the dark-skinned man's nose.

"Git back in that carriage, mister," Gurlap growled, "or I'm slicin' off a piece 'o that pretty nose."

Kirby Dall drew closer. He saw the fear in the eyes of the girl in the carriage. Gurlap's two men had come up on either side of her escort.

"I am not accustomed to insolence," the gentleman murmured. He grasped Gurlap's wrist and pushed the axe away.

The burly backwoodsman dropped the axe and struck the man in the face with his fist, knocking him back against the carriage wheel. Face convulsed with anger, he was prepared to jump on him with his feet when Kirby grabbed him by the shoulder.

The girl had screamed as the gentleman in green hit the carriage wheel and slumped to the ground, half-conscious. Ty Gurlap whirled around and snarled into Kirby's face.

"You want some o' this, mister?"



"I'd like to see that bill of sale, too," Kirby smiled coldly. He was waiting for Gurlap's next move and it was not long in coming. The frontiersman lashed out with his big fist, missing Kirby's jaw by a fraction of an inch.

Sol Cannavan whooped as the man with the scar suddenly darted in from the side. The giant picked him up from the ground, whirled him around once and threw him ten feet away.

Kirby moved into Ty Gurlap, striking with both fists for the face. He'd seen the frontier fights before and knew what to expect if Gurlap ever got him on the ground.

A yelling crowd tumbled out of the tavern and formed a circle around the two fighters. Sol Cannavan watched anxiously, keeping one eye on the man with the limp.

"Stay out of this," Kirby told him again. He hit Gurlap in the mouth with his right fist, smashing the lips and drawing blood. Gurlap was the heavier man, but Kirby had a few inches in height. He struck again and again at the powerful man in front of him, cutting Gurlap's face with each blow.

The backwoodsman came in low, trying to get his arms around Kirby's waist and throw him to the ground.

"Keep back!" Cannavan roared.

Kirby stepped in, his right fist coming up with terrific force and catching Gurlap flush on the nose. The big man screamed with the pain as the bridge of his nose went in and the blood poured down over his cut lips.

As he straightened up, stunned, Kirby stepped in again and drove his left fist into the man's stomach. Ty Gurlap gasped as the breath left his body. He staggered back and went down, mouth open, eyes bulging.

"He's finished," Cannavan yelled gleefully.

KIRBY turned to the man in the green coat. His lip was bleeding from Gurlap's blow and his face was white with anger.

"I owe you my thanks," he said briefly, looking Kirby straight in the eye. "I have no proficiency with my fists."

The young lawyer nodded. "Living on the frontier," he said, "we are more fortunate. We learn the customs of the country."

The man in the green coat looked at him in surprise, his dark eyes taking in the buckskin shirt Kirby had put on that morning, and the moccasins.

"I took you for a frontiersman," he said. "My name is Beaucamp. Armand Beaucamp from New Orleans." He turned toward the carriage as he spoke.

Kirby looked at the girl. "Kirby Dall," he introduced himself. "Attorney at law, Greenvale."

"*Mademoiselle Vivian Ralston*," Beaucamp smiled at the dark-skinned young lady on the seat. "I have heard of you American lawyers and I can believe now that you win most of your cases."

Kirby Dall bowed with a slight smile. "I did not know Mr. Ralston had a daughter," he said.

"I am Mr. Ralston's niece," Miss Ralston murmured. "Mr. Beaucamp and I came up from New Orleans." She added hastily, "With my aunt."

"I trust that we shall have the pleasure of meeting again," Kirby told them. He walked over to where the animals were tethered and loosened the black. Ty Gurlap was still sitting on the ground, head hanging on his chest. He looked up as Kirby walked past with the horse, the hatred showing in his eyes.

"I ain't forgettin' this, mister," he panted. "I'll run across you again."

Kirby tied the horse to the back of the carriage. "If our friend wishes to argue the case," he grinned at Beaucamp, "he can hire a lawyer. I should be glad to handle your side, Miss Ralston."

The girl smiled down at him and Armand Beaucamp climbed into the carriage. Kirby saw the Frenchman's dark eyes sweep the encampment and there was more than idle curiosity in his glance.

"This is the Tennessee militia," Kirby explained, "called out by Major General Jackson."

"You go to fight the British?" Beaucamp asked suavely.

Kirby shrugged. "More likely the Creeks," he said.

"Indians?" Miss Ralston asked, eyes widening.

"There's been a lot o' fightin', ma'am." Sol Cannavan put in, "an' the Creeks have been movin' north."

"We wish you success," Armand Beaucamp smiled as the carriage pulled away. "Adieu."

Sol Cannavan scratched his head as they disappeared around a bend in the road.

"Them Frenchmen ain't got much use for the British," he grinned, "not since Napoleon's been getting pushed around on the Continent."

Ty Gurlap was on his feet now and walking back toward the tavern with the help of his friends. At the door, he paused and stared back at the two men watching him.

"Want a lawyer, Gurlap?" Cannavan grinned.

"I want his scalp," the backwoodsman snarled.

That night Captain Donald received a dispatch to take his hundred frontiersmen to Fort Lane instead of Martin's Landing as originally planned.

Kirby Dall saw the frown on the red-haired officer's face as he read the note from General Jackson.

"What's up, Captain?" Dall asked.

"Andy's scouts have seen a large party of Red Sticks moving up in this direction," he explained. "He suggests we move everybody into the fort until we can locate the war party."

Sol Cannavan whistled softly. "It must be pretty bad," he grunted, "if Andy wants us to evacuate all the homes and plantations. Them Red Sticks will have a lot o' fun."

"It'll be the safest policy," Kirby said. "We'd rather have them burn homes than take scalps."

"Pick out twenty-five men," Captain Donald said to the lawyer. "Have them take Jackson's order to every home in the county. We'll rendezvous at Fort Lane."

Kirby nodded. Fort Lane was eight miles distant, and about two miles to the west of the Ralston plantation. It would be necessary to bring the planter and his family into the fort.

"If anyone refuses to go with you," Donald told him, "you are empowered to use force."



KIRBY DALL

KIRBY lined up his scouts that night and they started out in the early dawn. Twenty-five frontiersmen who were familiar with every inch of the surrounding country, moved out in different directions. Kirby headed south with Sol Cannavan.

"I ain't seen Gurlap an' his boys this mornin'," the giant muttered as they slipped into the woods behind the town. "They must o' moved out."

"We'll see more of them," Kirby smiled grimly. "Gurlap knows this country and he'd be a valuable aide to anyone coming in—British or Creeks."

"You think he'd turn renegade?" Cannavan asked.

The lawyer shrugged. "We'll see," he replied. They cut across country through the wilderness, stopping at two small log huts situated in small clearings. The first farmer spat tobacco juice when Kirby gave the order to move into the fort.

"Who in hell for?" he asked sourly.

Sol Cannavan grinned. "Andy Jackson sent the word," he explained easily. "We're figurin' on takin' a few shots at Weathersford an' his Red Sticks, an' Andy wants us at the fort."

The lank man grinned also. "That's different, mister," he said. "We'll move." They went on to the next cabin and it was the same story till the backwoodsman learned Andrew Jackson had given the word.

"What Andy says goes around here," Cannavan chuckled. "If he ever ran for

President he'd get every vote in the state."

Nearing the Ralston plantation, Kirby had the peculiar feeling that they were being watched. Twice he stopped suddenly and stared around, trying to peer through the thick foliage. The rays of the sun slanted down through the trees, reflecting on the wet leaves. It was about eight o'clock in the morning and the dew was still heavy.

Sol Cannavan loosened his hunting knife and sniffed. "There ain't no birds," he murmured. "I don't like it, Kirby."

Up ahead, they could see the open stretch of green lawn and the white house beyond, set among giant locust trees. Distinctly, they heard the sharp report of a pistol from the direction of the house.

"Come on," Kirby called. Another shot followed a moment later as the two men plunged through the forest toward the lawn.

As they broke out into the clearing, Sol Cannavan started to laugh. A man stood on the lawn with a pistol in his hand and two more on a table beside him. He had been firing the pistols at a target nailed to a tree about twenty paces distant.

"It's Beaucamp," Cannavan grinned, "takin' a little early mornin' pistol practice."

The Frenchman saw them as they came onto the lawn. He still had one of the guns in his hand and had been raising it to the target when he stopped and turned around. Without a moment's hesitation he lifted the weapon directly at the two men and fired.

Kirby had the ball whistle past his head. He heard it strike flesh with a soft thud. There was a low grunting sound and then he whirled around.

Two Indians, naked to the waist, and wearing buckskin leggins, had moved out of the woods behind them, stepping softly across the grass. Armand Beaucamp's pistol ball had struck the first one full in the chest and he'd dropped to the ground, a red painted war club falling at Kirby's heels.

The other whooped loudly and rushed at Sol Cannavan, brandishing a tomahawk. Two others with scalplocks and ugly painted faces had started out of the woods also.

Cannavan had no time to shoot but he managed to swing the long rifle in a wide arc. The barrel crashed into the Indian's

skull crushing it as if it had been an egg-shell.

Kirby lifted his rifle and squeezed the trigger on the nearest Indian. Like every Tennessee man he'd hunted squirrels with the Lancaster and he'd learned to shoot at the head. The Indian before him presented a broad painted chest at a distance of not more than twenty yards.

Kirby's ball struck him at the breastbone. The Creek's shoulders hunched as he tumbled on his face. Armand Beaucamp's pistol barked once more and the second Indian went down.

They heard the shrill yells from the forest and then several shots. A rifle ball cut through Kirby's jacket.

"Back to the house," he yelled.

The Frenchman covered them with the pistol as they streaked across the lawn. A short white-haired man had come out on the porch with the first sounds of firing. Kirby Dall saw Vivian Ralston's white face beside him.

BEAUCAMP had two pistols in his hand as he backed away coolly toward the house. Kirby glanced back as he reached the porch. None of the Creeks had attempted to cross the lawn.

"Get inside," he ordered the gentleman with the white hair. He waited till Beaucamp had come up beside him and they both jumped inside the door, after the girl and the white-haired man had disappeared. Sol Cannavan followed them.

The Indians were still firing from the woods, the balls striking the house, and one of them smashing a window. Quickly Kirby closed the heavy wooden shutters. Sol Cannavan had already taken his position at a window across the room. His rifle cracked for the first time and an Indian death cry immediately followed.

Armand Beaucamp stood by the door reloading his pistols. Kirby Dall grinned at him.

"You shoot straight, *Monsieur*," he acknowledged. "I owe you my life."

"I have several times been called upon to defend my honor with the pistols" the Frenchman smiled. "It was a privilege." He turned to the white-haired man who was coming out of a hallway with several muskets.

"Mr. Ralston," Beaucamp introduced them. "Mr. Dall."

Kirby nodded. He'd seen the big plantation owner a number of times but had never met him personally. Joseph Ralston was well past middle-age. He had a sharp nose and smiling blue eyes behind steel-rimmed spectacles.

"We've received word," Kirby stated, "that the Creek Indians are moving north to attack the settlements. General Jackson has issued instructions that everyone is to remove to Fort Lane until further notice."

"I perceive," Mr. Ralston smiled, "that we're too late."

Kirby Dall looked at the girl standing by the stairway. She was listening quietly, face pale, but composed.

"Do you have any of your help on which we can depend?" Kirby asked the plantation owner.

Mr. Ralston shrugged. "Most of my slaves are working in the north field. They'll scatter in the woods when they hear the firing. There are two servants in the house."

"We'll have to leave immediately," Kirby stated. He turned to Cannavan by the window. "How many men out there, Sol?"

The giant rubbed his jaw. "Maybe a dozen," he growled. "Weathersford must o' sent scouts up ahead o' the main party."

"How do you intend to leave?" Mr. Ralston inquired.

"Have your servants bring out the carriage," Kirby told him. "Harness your fastest animals. It's two miles to the fort."

"You think we can break through?" Beaucamp asked, looking at Vivian Ralston.

Kirby shrugged. "We'll have to take the chance," he said quietly. "If Weathersford comes up with the rest of his party we'll never get out alive."

Ralston had already gone into the kitchen to give his orders. The carriage house was only a few yards behind the main building. Kirby saw a colored man suddenly dart across the open space and enter the stone building. In the woods beyond several brown-skinned figures moved among the trees. The road to Fort Lane cut through the forest about fifty

yards to the right of the spot where the Creeks were concealed.

"We'll make a run for the carriage house," Kirby said, "when the horses are harnessed." He looked at Joseph Ralston. "Can you handle the animals, sir?"

The plantation owner smiled. "I'm a southerner," he said with some pride.

"If they hit the horses," Beaucamp observed, "they'll stop us."

"It's a chance we'll have to risk," Kirby told him. He watched the carriage house from the window. The colored man suddenly stepped to the door and waved.

"Load all the guns," Kirby stated. A young colored girl, obviously Miss Ralston's maid, came down the stairs. "Are there any others?" he asked Ralston.

"We're all here," the plantation owner said.

Kirby turned to the niece. "We are going to run for the carriage house," he explained. "You and your maid will have to lie on the floor as we start out."

Vivian Ralston nodded. "As you will," she said.

"Ready?" Kirby asked. Sol Cannavan stood by the door ready to throw it open. "You will start the carriage," Kirby told Mr. Ralston. "We'll jump on when you reach the road."

II

CANNAVAN threw open the door and stepped out, Kirby and Armand Beaucamp followed, forming a screen in front of the women. The Creeks yelled from the woods and opened fire. Sol Cannavan knelt and fired once. Kirby Dall heard the big man's low chuckle as an Indian fell from behind a tree and rolled on the grass.

Joseph Ralston threw open the stable doors and climbed up on the driver's seat. Vivian Ralston, the maid and the colored servant quickly stepped into the carriage.

"We're coming!" Ralston shouted, whipping up the horses.

Kirby was kneeling outside the door, the Lancaster at his shoulder, one of Ralston's pistols in his belt. He pulled on a Creek flitting among the trees, and saw the Indian stumble and dart for cover.

Beaucamp and Cannavan leaped on the carriage as it moved past and tumbled inside. Kirby ran beside it a few yards and

then climbed up on the back. He saw Vivian Ralston and the two colored people crouching on the floor beneath him.

Beaucamp and Cannavan knelt on the seats ready to fire as Ralston turned the big bay animals down the road. The open-topped carriage careened dangerously as they cut around a bend in the lawn and headed for the forest road.

Kirby saw the Creeks cutting through the woods to head them off. Ralston was leaning forward on the seat, lashing with the whip and calling to the proud bays.

An Indian reached the road and leaped out in front of the animals, trying to catch the reins. Beaucamp snapped one of his pistols at the Creek and the Indian went down, the carriage wheels passing over his body.

Two others had broken through the woods not more than ten yards away. One of them carried a rifle which he fired wildly. Cannavan knocked him down with a well-placed shot from the Lancaster. The second man tried to leap onto the back of the moving carriage.

Kirby had emptied the rifle a moment before. He swung it now by the barrel, smashing the stock against the Creek's brow and knocking him into the road, his face a bloody mask.

The big bays responded to Joseph Ralston's pleadings. In a matter of seconds they were around a bend in the road and out of gunshot.

Kirby looked at Sol Cannavan. A rifle ball had grazed the giant's right cheek, leaving a livid red mark. Beaucamp and Ralston were untouched.

"I reckon we're all right now," Cannavan grinned. "Them's some horses, Mr. Ralston."

"The finest matched team in the south," the plantation owner called back proudly. "I wouldn't take five thousand dollars for them."

The bays pulled the carriage into Fort Lane a few minutes later. Kirby saw the crowd of settlers and frontiersmen going through the big log gate.

Captain Donald had just arrived with his contingent from Greenvale. He looked at the two arrows stuck in the door of the carriage, and immediately ordered the main gate closed.

"Where did you meet them, Kirby?" he

asked anxiously. "They must have flown across country."

"It was probably an advance scout," the lawyer explained. "I don't know how close Weathersford is with the main force."

"They'll be heading for here," Donald told him gloomily. "We won't have any more than a hundred and fifty men."

Kirby Dall watched the rich plantation owner herding his niece and the colored servants into a log house in the center of the enclosure. Fort Lane had been erected by the government years before, but there had been no garrison since the previous fall. The rude stockade was an emergency haven about seventy-five yards square with a ten foot log palisade and wooden towers at two of the corners.

In the center of the square was a long log structure which had been used as headquarters by the army garrison. Dilapidated log barracks ranged the walls at intervals, the wood dry and worm-eaten, ideal combustible materials for burning Creek arrows.

"At any rate we have water," Donald said, nodding to the stream which flowed under the wall at the west end of the fort.

Armand Beaucamp came up and bowed to the commanding officer politely.

"I am at your service, *Monsieur*," he said quietly. "I have had military experience."

"French army?" Donald asked.

Beaucamp shrugged. "I am ready to fight for the people who fight for me," he said.

"Take the east wall," Captain Donald suggested. "I'll give you thirty men. Watch that they don't climb over after the Creeks."

Beaucamp smiled at the sally. "I shall be careful, Captain," he stated.

Several more of the backwoodsmen came through the wicket gate before it was permanently closed.

"We're ready for them," Captain Donald said grimly. "Mr. Weathersford will realize he has a little problem when he reaches here." The commanding officer paused. "I've sent a runner to Martin's Landing to contact Jackson, but it's doubtful whether he'll be able to help us. The militia are still gathering and it'll take a little time before they are organized and ready to march."

"He'll probably send an advance guard to help us," Kirby pointed out, "but we'll have to hold them off until then."

"It would help," Donald said, "to know Weathersford's strength."

KIRBY waved to Sol Cannavan talking with another frontiersman near the wall.

"Cannavan and I know this country," he said quietly. "We've hunted over it since we were boys. I should like permission to go out."

"It'll be dangerous," Donald told him. "The woods are swarming with Red Sticks." He nodded to three columns of smoke in the distance where log cabins were going up in flames.

"We'll take the chance," Kirby said. He saw Vivian Ralston standing by the door of the headquarter's building. Armand Beauchamp was distributing his men along the east wall. "We're looking up Weathersford," Kirby told Cannavan. "He's probably coming up the Hoosatic River with his force."

The giant nodded. "In that case," he stated, "I reckon we kin move around below White Falls and go down the other side o' the water."

"We'll probably get back before night-fall," Kirby told the captain. "The Creeks won't attack till tomorrow."

Captain Donald laughed bitterly. "They'll be too busy today burning everything in sight," he scowled. "Good luck, men."

Armand Beauchamp came over as Kirby and Cannavan shook hands with the captain before leaving.

"You are going, gentlemen?" he asked.

"We intend to do a little scouting in the vicinity," Kirby informed him. As Captain Donald hurried away to the other end of the fort, Kirby added, "If the Creeks should break through, I'm sure you'll know what to do with Miss Ralston."

Beauchamp looked at him curiously. "I shall keep an extra ball in the pistol," he promised. "I've heard of the Indian practices."

The girl was watching them from the gate. Kirby waved to her and walked toward the wicket gate. He saw the question on her lips but he didn't stop.

"Notice," Cannavan murmured as they

trotted across the open meadow toward the woods, "that Gurlap wasn't in the fort?"

"We might run across him out here," Kirby said coldly.

Reaching the woods, he felt better. It was dark and cool as they followed an old deer path, moving soundlessly down the hard-packed trail.

They made a wide circuit of the Ralston House and Cannavan pointed to the cloud of smoke.

"There it goes," he said grimly. "I reckon when this is over Miss Vivian will be going back to New Orleans with Beauchamp."

Kirby Dall tightened his grip on the Lancaster and trotted on ahead. They could smell the smoke from the burning home as they came closer. In a small glade another fire was burning within half a mile of the Ralston place.

"Tom Jackson lived here," Cannavan growled. "Had a patch o' corn up on the slope, Kirby. It took a lot o' sweatin' to set up that cabin and Tom will want to take it out o' the Creek's hides."

Five miles beyond the Ralston House they crawled down the gorge just below White Falls, still without having seen any Creeks. Twice Cannavan pointed to moccasin tracks and broken twigs along the trail, indicating that some one had passed in the vicinity.

The Hoosatic River plunged over White Falls, falling about seventy feet to the rocks below. They could hear the roar of the water as they stepped across a series of rocks jutting out of the swiftly moving stream.

Keeping within the protection of the woods, they moved up the channel on the other side of the falls.

Cannavan pointed to a pool a little to the left of the falls. It was a spot where they had gone fishing many times, coming home wet with the spray but always with a string of trout.

"If they came by the river," the giant said, "they probably got their canoes upstream on the other side o' the falls."

Kirby nodded. It had been his conjecture also that Weathersford would go as far as he could by canoe and then march his Creeks overland to the fort.

There was a rocky little trail leading up past the falls and they climbed it care-

fully. At the summit they could see far up the river. Kirby Dall crouched among the rocks and stared at the long line of canoes drawn up on the bank of the river, three hundred yards upstream, and across from them.

Sol Cannavan let out his breath in a long sigh. "There's a damn awful lot of 'em," he muttered. Small campfires were burning on the shore, and hundreds of Creek warriors roasted meat over them.

"We'll keep back in the woods," Kirby advised, "and move upstream."

Cannavan looked at him grimly. He, too, had seen those ominous objects on the log raft tied up at the bank of the river among the canoes.

"What do you think?" the giant asked.

"The Creeks don't use cannon," Kirby Dall murmured. "Weathersford must have gotten them from the British."

MOVING back into the woods, they slipped up the river till they were directly opposite the Creek encampment on the other shore, nearly two hundred feet across.

"Take a look at 'em," Cannavan scowled bitterly. "Looks like nine pounders to me. They'll knock down them log walls at Fort Lane like they were paper."

Kirby lay on his stomach among the bushes and peered at the two brass cannon lashed to the log raft. Under a tarpaulin stretched across the deck were boxes of powder and nine pound cannon balls.

"It ain't fair," Cannavan said. "Our men are usin' rifles an' the British give the Creeks cannon to work on us."

"There's no question of fairness in times of war," Kirby told him. "The British agents have been delegated to keep the west fermented with war so they can work in the east. They might have a much harder time than they're having if Jackson or Harrison were to march to the sea with five thousand of the best marksmen in the world."

"Who'll work them guns?" Cannavan asked. "The Creeks are probably afraid of 'em."

As if in answer, two white men stepped out across the canoes and onto the gently rocking raft. One of them walked with a limp, the other, even at the distance, they recognized as Ty Gurlap.

"I reckon he's showin' his colors," Cannavan murmured. "I'll know whose side he's on the next time we meet."

"If they ever get those cannon outside Fort Lane," Kirby said, "Captain Donald may as well surrender."

"Who'll stop the butcherin'?" he asked. "Even Weathersford can't hold those young bucks once they get inside."

A single canoe paddled by three men was pushing up along the bank. In the stern sat a slender, sinewy man with a hawk-like face and light complexion for an Indian. Like the others he was stripped to the waist and wore the regulation Creek leggings. His face was unpainted.

"That's him!" Cannavan whispered. "Weathersford himself!"

Kirby watched the Indian chieftain with interest. Aside from Tecumseh, Weathersford was the greatest Indian east of the Mississippi. He was reputed to be part white.

Weathersford stepped onto the raft holding the cannon, spoke a few words with Gurlap, examined the guns, and then went ashore.

"The British hired Gurlap to handle the guns," Kirby whispered. "He's probably not a trained cannoneer, but he only has to hit the walls and open a breach for Weathersford's braves."

"I kin pick him off from here," Cannavan mumbled. "You get the other one, Kirby."

"No," the lawyer told him. "If we kill Gurlap, Weathersford will wait for another



CANNAVAN

man or try to work the cannon himself."

"What do we do?" Cannavan wanted to know.

Kirby Dall smiled coldly. "We'll take their cannon away," he murmured. "Drop them at the bottom of White Falls."

Sol Cannavan stared a moment and then his wide face broke out into a grin.

"Tonight?" he asked.

"Tonight," Kirby said.

They crawled back through the brush and hid in a gully the remainder of the day. A party of Creeks, crossing the river to hunt, passed within twenty-five feet of their hiding place but failed to see them.

LATE in the afternoon, when he started to go down, Kirby slipped back to the brink of the river and stared across the water. More canoes had landed at the beach, but the raft with the cannon was in the same spot, moored to the bank by two ropes.

Small fires were springing up all along the river's edge and he could see the Creeks walking in front of them. Sol Cannavan sat up in the tall grass when he came back.

"That river's gonna be cold," the giant chuckled.

Kirby nodded. "The current's pretty fast out in the middle. We'll start across about two hundred yards upstream and then cut across to the raft."

Cannavan rubbed his heavy jaw. "You ain't thought about comin' back," he said finally. "That current will still be pullin' at us an' the falls is only a couple hundred yards down the river."

"We could crawl up on the bank," Kirby grinned, "and give ourselves up."

"I reckon we'll take a chance on the swim," Cannavan laughed.

They waited till the moon was high and the campfires had started to dwindle on the other shore. Then, undressing, they packed their clothing in neat bundles and left them on the bank close to the falls. The rifles were placed on top of the clothing. Each man carried a long hunting knife fastened around his neck by means of a buckskin thong.

"If we don't make it," Cannavan muttered, "somebody's in fer a couple o' nice rifles."

Walking back along the bank of the river, they scratched themselves consider-

ably on the briers growing near the water.

"All right," Kirby said when they were two hundred yards above the Creek camp.

The water was cold and they sank, ankle-deep, into the mud as they walked out from the bank. When the water was up to his waist, Kirby let himself slide forward. The shock was terrific but his body became gradually used to the change. Cannavan followed with a low gurgle.

"Get out into the middle of the stream," Kirby whispered. "Then we can float down till we get near the raft."

Already they were opposite the campfires at the extreme edge of the Creek encampment. With a few strokes under water, Kirby pulled himself in closer toward the bank. Around each fire they could see the sprawled forms of the Indians, wrapped in blankets, feet toward the hot coals.

One fire, near the raft, flickered up, and the light reflected on the shining gun metal of the cannons. Kirby Dall glanced up into the dark night sky, thankful that there was no moon to make matters worse.

Fifteen yards from the raft, still swimming noiselessly, he pointed toward the line at the bow side of the raft. Cannavan nodded and then disappeared.

Kirby floated in toward the raft until he caught hold of the side. Hoisting himself up over the edge, he stared around a moment. Then quickly, he lowered his body to the water again. A sentinel was lying on his back not more than five yards away. It was impossible to see whether the man was awake or asleep.

The nearest campfire was not more than fifteen yards from the edge of the water. Kirby could see one of the Creeks turn over in his sleep. He moved along the edge of the river to the tow line. Then slipping the knife from the neck thong, he cut through the rope.

On the other side of the raft, he saw a white arm rise out of the water and slash at the other line. The raft started to move with the current. It edged out very slowly at first, one end swinging around easily and grating against the nearest canoe.

Kirby Dall held his breath and gripped the edge of the raft with both hands. Inch by inch, the heavy raft moved out from shore. Again, Kirby lifted himself over the edge to look at the sleeping Indian on board. He saw Cannavan's head on the

other side. The giant pulled himself along the raft till he was hanging next to Kirby.

They were ten yards from shore and then twenty. Another ten yards and then the Indian on the raft sat up. Kirby grasped Cannavan's shoulder and pushed him down. They held their breaths.

The man uttered a sharp exclamation and then rose to his feet. He ran to the edge of the raft and stood just above the spot where the two white men were hanging. As he opened his mouth to yell, Sol Cannavan reached up and grasped him by the ankle.

One tug, and the Creek went overboard, hitting the water with a terrific splash. The raft was now out in midstream and moving swiftly toward the falls.

A rifle shot sounded from the shore. Sol Cannavan thrashed a moment in the water with the Creek, and then came up, the hunting knife still in his right hand.

"Let's go," the giant muttered.

KIRBY slipped off the raft and swam toward the opposite shore. He could feel the tremendous tug of the current as it pulled him after the raft and down toward White Falls.

The bank was alive with Indians now, shooting wildly and climbing into canoes to give chase.

"Get under," Cannavan growled.

Both men ducked under the water, swam ten yards and came up. Glancing back, Kirby saw the canoes cutting out into the stream. Another volley of bullets swished over their heads or struck the water around them.

"Duck," Cannavan muttered again.

When they came up again, they could see the raft some distance beyond them, drifting rapidly toward the falls. Several canoes were chasing the raft while the others had taken after the two men in the water.

"They can't make it," Cannavan gasped. "That raft's movin' too fast, Kirby."

Still the three canoes cut down stream after the cannon raft, urged on by shouting men from the banks. Kirby Dall cut for the opposite bank, swimming now with all of his strength.

Gradually, he felt the pull of the current slacken. A half-dozen canoes with men holding torches in the bows, were

pushing toward them as they found their footing and stumbled up the bank.

Again, the rifles cracked as they crouched low and ran down the bank to the spot where they'd placed their rifles and clothing. Pausing only to watch the raft majestically tumble over the falls, they scooped up their possessions and plunged into the wilderness.

Kirby had noticed two of the canoes turn back when the raft got too close to the falls. The other tried, but was unsuccessful. Frantically, the four Creeks in the frail shell, tried to head it around and fight back against the current.

As they ran through the woods, Kirby heard the wailing death yells as the canoe slipped over the brink.

"They took their chance," Cannavan panted, "an' they didn't make it."

A mile from the river they stopped to dress again. The Creeks had given up the chase as a bad job in the night. Kirby sat on a fallen log to catch his breath.

"Weathersford had a large body of men with him," he said soberly. "I think Captain Donald is in for a fight tomorrow morning."

"We can hold 'em off without the cannon," the giant grinned.

An hour later they were inside Fort Lane, conferring with the commanding officer. Donald listened to their story quietly, smiling as they mentioned the raft going over the falls.

"I'll commend you men to General Jackson," he promised. "With the cannon, Weathersford would undoubtedly break through."

"I'm sure they'll strike at dawn," Kirby said. "Weathersford has his entire force with him now."

"We'll be ready for them," Captain Donald nodded. "We have plenty of powder and ball and they can't burn us out." He stopped and studied the two scouts quietly. "You boys better get some rest," he advised, "if you intend to take part in the fighting tomorrow."

"We do," Cannavan promised. "There's plenty o' Creeks for all of us."

Walking down toward one of the empty barracks, Kirby saw Armand Beaucamp and Vivian Ralston talking near the head-quarter's cabin. He passed by in the darkness without a word.

"You figure those two will get married?" Cannavan asked softly.

"I wouldn't know," Kirby told him brusquely.

"Sure," the giant grinned. "We'll forget about it, Kirby."

III

IN THE morning Weathersford came with five hundred braves, moving at the log palisade in a bronze wave. They came out of the mist rolling across the meadow; they came within thirty yards of the wall before the frontiersmen's rifles began to crack.

Kirby Dall with Sol Cannavan had been posted at the south wall where the stream came in under the palisade. Weathersford struck from all directions, his hundreds of braves coming up to the very walls and firing through the loopholes.

The hundred and seventy-five white men fired steadily, very few balls missing the marks. A half-dozen braves managed to scramble over the wall but were killed before they could get inside.

Kirby watched the gallant Weathersford leading his men in vain charge after charge as the sun broke through the trees and slanted across the meadow of death.

Over a hundred and fifty of the Creeks lay dead on the field when Weathersford withdrew for a rest. Sol Cannavan leaned against the wall and took a long breath.

"Didn't see Gurlap out there did you?" he asked once.

Kirby Dall smiled grimly. "Gurlap doesn't fight this way," he said slowly.

Running across the enclosure for a word with Donald, he saw Vivian Ralston helping two of the wounded men back to the headquarter's barracks. She saw him and nodded. Blood was pouring down the cheek of the frontiersman she was helping away from the wall, but she didn't flinch.

Joseph Ralston trotted past for a drink of water from the stream, his face blackened with gun-powder. He carried one of his own smooth-bore muskets and he grinned at Kirby as he ran.

"We're holding them," Captain Donald said, "and we've only lost a dozen men, Kirby. Weathersford won't take this sort of thing very long."

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BEAUCAMP

"He'll come again," Kirby warned. "If he gets past Fort Lane, the whole northwest territory is open to him. He can ravage through before General Jackson can get his militia organized."

"I'd hate to think what would have happened if he'd brought those cannon up with him," Donald murmured. He glanced through the loop-hole with his glasses. "They're coming again," he muttered. "Better get back to your post, Kirby."

Running across the square again, Kirby glanced toward the east wall where Armand Beaucamp had charge. The Frenchman was walking among his men, talking calmly, steadying them.

"He's a good soldier," Captain Donald had said of the dark-skinned man.

The Creeks came on again, striking at every sector of the fort at once. Kirby fired and reloaded mechanically along with the others. The barrel of the Lancaster was becoming hot to the touch. Still the Creeks came on, several of them crouching down against the wall so that it was impossible to fire at them. Kirby heard their guttural shouts through the log wall.

Several scalplocks suddenly appeared in the stream a few yards away. The Creeks had ducked under the water, coming up inside the enclosure.

Sol Cannavan whooped and jumped into the stream, axe in hand. In a few seconds the water was running red and three dead Creeks floated across the square, heads split open.

Kirby Dall lifted his rifle and fired at

a bronze face appearing over the parapet. He looked into blazing dark eyes and a cruel, thin-lipped mouth. His ball struck the brave in the forehead, leaving a small hole. The Creek's eyes flickered, and then he dropped back.

Others were swarming over the walls at the east side of the fort. Kirby called to a dozen of his men and they cut across the square to aid the Frenchman.

BEAUCAMP was swinging a rifle by the barrel, slashing at the Creeks as they dropped like flies from the wall. Half of Beaucamp's thirty were on the ground when Kirby arrived with the reinforcements. Firing, and then moving in with axe and hunting knife, they soon killed off the remaining Indians in the fort.

Beaucamp sat down on the ground, bleeding profusely from an axe wound in the shoulder. He smiled up at Kirby, sweat sliding down his brow.

"Today," he murmured, "I am glad I fight with the Americans."

As Kirby helped the man to the hospital room, Vivian Ralston ran out to them.

"Armand!" she called.

"It's not a bad wound," Kirby told her quietly. He cut away the Frenchman's shirt and then went down to the stream for a bucket of water. On every side the Creeks had been repulsed and were running back to the protection of the woods.

Coming back with the water, Kirby saw Sol Cannavan stagger back from the loophole at which he'd been shooting. The big man dropped the long rifle, clutched at his right side and slumped to the ground.

Kirby hurried up with the bucket to Beaucamp's side and then ran toward the south wall. Cannavan was sitting on the ground, shaking his head foolishly. Blood seeped through his fingers as he clutched his side; the anger showed in the giant's pale blue eyes.

"Damn," he muttered. "That must o' been the last shot the Creeks sent, Kirby."

With the aid of another man, Kirby got Cannavan to the headquarter's building where the single doctor was working feverishly on three dozen cases. Armand Beaucamp sat against the wall, his shoulder bandaged, face pale.

Hawkins, the Greenvale doctor, exam-

ined Cannavan's wound and found it to be deep but not dangerous. The ball had slid through the loophole and passed between two of the giant's ribs.

"I'm afraid it'll be some time before you do any fighting, young man," Hawkins told Cannavan. "You'll have to hire a steady nurse till you recover from this."

"I'll take care of him," Kirby said quietly. Cannavan's eyes were open, but he was scarcely conscious. Like himself, the giant had no parents and no close relations. He'd earned his living as a hunter on the frontier.

Captain Donald came into the hospital building with the news that Weathersford and his Creeks had completely disappeared.

"I believe some of Jackson's men are on the way," the commanding officer beamed, "and Weathersford is aware of it."

At two o'clock that afternoon, two hundred men in buckskin plunged through the wilderness, grim-faced and determined, and came out in front of the fort.

Donald's men gave them a hearty cheer and ran out to meet them. Many of the newcomers had had relatives and close friends in the vicinity of Greenvale.

"Andy sent us flyin'," a big lantern-jawed frontiersman told Kirby, "soon as he heard Weathersford was movin' north."

"When will Jackson strike?" Kirby wanted to know.

The backwoodsman shrugged. "Andy figures on destroyin' the whole Creek Nation," he explained, "in one fight. That's his way. He don't like any foolin' around. He'll have over a thousand men when he starts to move, an' Weathersford better look out."

That night Kirby had his first opportunity to speak with the southern girl alone. She came out of the hospital with a bucket just as Kirby was crossing the stream. She stopped and came toward him.

"How are the patients?" Kirby wanted to know.

"We were very fortunate," the girl told him. "Captain Donald tells me we had but ten deaths in the entire fight."

"How is Beaucamp?" Kirby asked quietly.

Vivian Ralston looked at him queerly. "Armand is doing well," she said.

KIRBY PAUSED. "You have known him long?" he asked finally. "He certainly proved himself in this siege."

Miss Ralston smiled. "I heard the story of the cannon," she said. "You do pretty well yourself, Mr. Dall."

Kirby's face flushed. "There was little danger," he said, "and we know the wilderness."

Again the southern girl smiled. "Let others judge of the danger," she told him. "We have known Armand Beaucamp for about a year. He has his quarters near our home in New Orleans."

"You have always lived in New Orleans?" Kirby asked.

"My mother was a French woman," Vivian Ralston said slowly, "and my father is English—or American." She paused. "I did not know my mother very long, but father is still living in New Orleans."

"I presume you will be going back soon?" Kirby ventured.

"We had intended leaving next week," the girl told him. "My aunt has been staying in Nashville. She will accompany me."

"And Beaucamp?" Kirby Dall said.

Vivian Ralston shrugged. "I suppose Beaucamp will be leaving for New Orleans also. Perhaps you, too, will one day visit our city."

"It would be a pleasure," Kirby told her. He went back to the hospital to see Sol Cannavan. The giant lay on his back on a blanket in one corner, face pale, fever in his eyes.

"I'll get Weathersford," he muttered. "Then Andy Jackson an' I are goin' after the British."

"There's plenty of time," Kirby said. "You stay where you are, Sol."

In the morning he watched Vivian Ralston and her uncle, with Armand Beaucamp, drive away in a carriage to the home of Joseph Ralston's friend in Nashville.

The Frenchman, still very weak, shook hands cordially with the young lawyer.

"I hope we shall meet again," he said.

"Stranger things happen," Kirby smiled, "in times of war." He watched Vivian Ralston's eyes and thought he saw a trace of sadness in them. She said sprightly:

"If you should come to New Orleans, Mr. Dall, you must stop in to see us."

"I shall," Kirby promised. Once again as the carriage rolled out of the fort, Kirby



VIVIAN RALSTON

noticed Beaucamp watching a squad of militia drilling on the fields outside the gate.

Kirby had Sol Cannavan transferred to his own quarters in Greenvale, the big man protesting all the while that Kirby should leave him at the tavern and accompany Captain Donald's force to Martin's Landing.

"You'll be missin' the big fight," the giant muttered, "Jackson's cleanin' out the Creeks this time, Kirby."

"If you don't talk so much," the lawyer smiled, "you might be up in time to take part yourself." He knew the kind of attention Cannavan would receive at the tavern, and Doctor Hawkins had stated the wound would be serious if not properly attended to.

Two months later, a courier brought them the news that General Jackson had met the Creeks at Horseshoe Bend, annihilating the entire force of eight hundred or a thousand warriors. The Creeks were broken and never again would they move out of their villages in raiding parties.

Sol Cannavan was sitting up and almost well enough to fight again.

"I guess Andy got along without us," the giant muttered in disgust. He grinned then. "I reckon he'll be needin' us, Kirby, if the British make a move on New Orleans."

Kirby Dall listened and nodded quietly. New Orleans made him think of a subject which had been close to him since the Ralston carriage rolled out of Fort Lane.

Rumor had it that the British intended to send an armada through the Gulf to New Orleans, thus blocking the mouth of the great river. Once at the Creole city, they could move north, coming through the back door of the States and gaining control of the vast territory of Louisiana which President Jefferson had purchased from Napoleon eleven years ago.

"They say Andy's goin' to Florida now," Sol Cannavan went on, "to work on them Spaniards an' the Seminoles. They'll get what the Creeks got if they get him riled."

Kirby smiled. Everyone knew of the discontent in Florida, and the dislike of the Spaniards for the Americans. Louisiana had been a Spanish possession until Napoleon overran the Peninsular and set his brother on the Spanish throne. In need of ready cash to fight the British, the Emperor had sold his newly acquired possession to America, and the Spanish had resented it.

"If they give Jackson command of the southern sector," Kirby said, "and the protection of New Orleans, he'll have to call the Kentucky and Tennessee militia to help him."

"That means us," Sol Cannavan chuckled. "I'd like a crack at the British, Kirby."

"The British just cracked Napoleon in Spain," Kirby reminded him. "The force they send to New Orleans will consist of the finest trained soldiers in the world, and they will be able to send plenty of them now that the European war is about over."

"Let 'em come," Cannavan growled.

"There are no braver men in the world," Kirby Dall said soberly, "than the British infantry."

It was late in the year that the news reached Greenvale President Madison had assigned General Jackson to New Orleans to protect it against a vast British armada moving on the southern city.

"This means we move," Cannavan grinned. "Andy must be sendin' dispatches north already."

Kirby Dall nodded gravely. A force of ten or fifteen thousand troops, some of them Wellington's own Peninsular soldiers, aided by marines and bluejackets, would land in the vicinity of New Orleans. They'd be protected by ships-of-the-line and fighter frigates. Against this imposing force, General Jackson would have to recruit his own

Tennessee militia, a few regiments of the United States regulars, and whatever recruits he could assemble in Louisiana.

Captain Donald brought the news that night that the Greenvale militia were to assemble immediately and join with Colonel Coffee's rifle men at Hancock, some distance down the river.

"This is it," Cannavan murmured. "We're movin' on now, Kirby."

Once again the hawk-faced men came out of the wilderness with their Lancaster rifles, powder horns full of the best Eagle powder, bullet pouches bulging with the small leaden pellets. Andrew Jackson was calling and he didn't have to call twice.

Kirby Dall put away the black hat and the black barrister's coat. He got the buckskin shirt and the coonskin cap from his trunk and reported to the tavern.

"I hope we get to New Orleans," Donald told him, "before the British arrive. Jackson will need every man available in this battle."

"You've heard of the peace rumors?" Kirby asked suddenly. "The papers claim President Madison has already sent a commission to Ghent."

The red-haired captain laughed. "Even if there is a treaty of peace being made," he stated flatly, "the British want possession of New Orleans and the Louisiana Territory. Once they get it, they'll keep their forces there and defy us to take it back, treaty or no treaty." He paused. "The British Government has never officially recognized Napoleon's seizure or sale of Louisiana."

"Then the battle for New Orleans is of tremendous importance," Kirby murmured.

"Jackson knows if he loses," Donald explained, "he throws away half of an empire." He paused. "And the treaty of peace, even if already signed, will have no bearing on the battle. This British armada was given orders to sail with the peace commissioners already conferring at Ghent!"

IV

CAPTAIN DONALD'S men moved out the next morning, arriving at Hancock two days later. Kirby Dall stared at the huge encampment of Tennesseans. Colonel Coffee's own mounted riflemen,

carrying long-handled hatchets instead of sabers, were ready to go. Company after company of frontiersmen, in woolen or buckskin shirts and leggings, tramped into the town.

"They ain't much on drill," Sol Cannavan remarked that night after the Greenvale men were encamped, "and they do a lot o' arguin' among themselves, but they'll be ready when the British come."

Kirby Dall walked among the campfires listening to the talk. A dispute arose between two of the men which ended in a free-for-all. Captain Donald was among the officers who intervened to stop the fighting.

"There's only one man in the States who can handle this army," the red-haired man panted when it was over, "and that's Old Hickory."

"I'll feel better," Kirby grinned, "when this crowd is at New Orleans fighting the British instead of each other."

They arrived at the battle front after the first skirmish with the British had been fought. Colonel Coffee's mounted riflemen managed to get into the fight, but the Greenvale militia, marching more slowly, arrived a day late.

General Jackson had retreated with his force from the first battlefield several miles below and was rapidly digging in behind the Rodriguez Canal, a dry ditch several feet deep and a dozen yards in width.

The artillery, nine and twelve pound batteries, were being rushed into position. The line of fortifications was eighteen hundred yards long, running from the river into the swamps.

"The British have anchored their fleet in Lake Borgne," Captain Donald told Kirby, "and have come up the Bayou Bienvenue. Jackson met them yesterday and stopped their advance. I think they'll be a little more cautious now."

Kirby and the other wide-eyed Tennessee mountain men, stared at the varied army General Jackson had raised. There were men in gray, with white-crossed stripes, comprising the Seventh U. S. Infantry; the gayly-clad Creole militia under Colonel Plache from New Orleans, held a sector; Coffee's Tennessee men were going into position at the left of the line; Colonel Carroll's command, more Tennessee men, dug in at the center.

"Who in hell are these?" Sol Cannavan pointed to a group of nondescript men in bright bandannas, short pantaloons, dark-haired, swarthy faces.

Donald grinned. "I imagine that'll be LaFitte's command," he said. "They're the best cannoneers in Jackson's army. Some of these boys learned their lessons in the French artillery."

"Lately," Kirby smiled, "they've been pirates." He'd heard tales of Jean LaFitte and the freebooters of Barataria. Evidently, they'd come in to fight against their hated rivals, the English.

"Here's the General now," Captain Donald said softly.

KIRBY looked with interest at the man with the reddish-gray hair and the piercing blue eyes. Jackson had been wounded in a duel prior to taking the post at New Orleans. His pale face and gaunt cheeks indicated that he'd not quite recovered.

He shook hands cordially with Captain Donald, calling him by his first name. It was surprising the amount of men he knew in the corps of the Tennesseans. Kirby had seen him once in Nashville when but a boy.

"Mr. Kirby Dall," Donald introduced him. "The young man who took away Weathersford's cannon at Fort Lane. I mentioned him, General."

Jackson's eyes lit up as he grasped Kirby's hand warmly. "I've wanted to meet you, young man," he smiled. "I trust we can find work for you here."

Sol Cannavan was standing by, grinning from ear to ear. Jackson turned on him and thumped his back so that he nearly lost his balance.

"Cannavan," he chuckled, "after this fight, I promise to pin your shoulders to a mat in catch-as-catch-can."

The giant made two of the thin-faced General, but he smiled bashfully. "I reckon it would be a good fight, General," he said.

They watched the tall man stride away down the line, issuing orders right and left, stopping to speak with the Baratarian pirates and examine the gun emplacements.

"This will be an army now," Captain Donald said. "They'll fight like one man."

A company of half-naked savages trotted by to take positions in the swamps and

harass the British troops as they came up.

"Captain Jugeat," Donald informed them, "and his Choctaws. There never was an army like this, Kirby."

Kirby Dall nodded. Many nationalities were represented on the Rodriguez fortification line including Indians, pirates, Creoles, Kentucky and Tennessee frontiersmen, regular United States Infantrymen and Dragoons.

Donald conferred with another officer for a few minutes and then came back to the spot where the Greenvale men were digging in.

"We've just learned," he said quietly, "that Sir Edward Pakenham, brother-in-law of the Duke of Wellington, has arrived to take charge of the British forces. They're bringing up heavy cannon from the ships to bombard our lines."

In the distance, across the fields of cane stubble, Kirby saw the tiny figures in red moving up the big guns—twenty-four and thirty-two pounders, along with howitzers and the famed Congreve rocket guns.

THE bombardment began the next day and the heavy shot whizzed through the air, some of them smashing into the Macarte House behind the lines where Jackson had his headquarters. The big rockets made a tremendous noise but did little damage.

"When do we start in?" Sol Cannavan growled. "A man can't reach them guns with a rifle."

Jackson had already given command to the batteries along the American line. The Baratarian guns opened up first, commanded by Dominique You, LaFitte's lieutenant.

Ball after ball exploded among the British placements as the Americans cheered lustily. The grinning pirates worked like madmen and General Jackson stood nearby, a half-smile on his face.

Later in the day, the British retreated, leaving many dead on the field, along with their shattered artillery.

"That means they'll have to risk a direct assault," Captain Donald asserted. "They'll probably outnumber us four or five to one. Jackson's hoping for a thousand Kentucky riflemen who are supposed to be coming down the river on flatboat. If they arrive in time it'll be a more even battle."

"Why hasn't Pakenham tried an assault before?" Kirby asked.

Donald shrugged. "He probably doesn't know Jackson's weakness, and besides he's still landing men from the transports. They have to be rowed up about sixty miles of bayou through the swamps."

"What about that big British fleet?" Sol Cannavan put in. "Why in hell doesn't the admiral bring it up and bombard New Orleans?"

"They can't get the ships up the river," Donald smiled. "New Orleans is over a hundred miles from the mouth of the Mississippi and there's a prevailing downstream breeze."

"Then you think the British are getting ready to charge the breastworks?" Kirby questioned.

"As soon as Pakenham has sufficient troops on the field," Captain Donald replied, "I believe he'll make his attempt. General Jackson is fortifying the opposite bank of the river also because he fears Pakenham might try to cross and hit his flank."

"Whatever he does," Sol Cannavan chuckled, "Andy will be ready for him."

"Let's hope," Donald said seriously, "those Kentuckians arrive in time."

Kirby got hold of a shovel and went to work with the others deepening the dried-up canal and throwing the earth on the breastworks. Jackson had chosen his position well. With the swamp on the left side being utterly impassable, and the British without ships to move up the river, Pakenham had to either charge the fortifications or give it up as a bad job.

Small fires sprang up behind the earthen wall as night fell. All along the line Kirby heard the word, "When will the British come?"

Captain Donald shook his head. "War is a game of waiting," he said quietly. "It is possible the British won't attack for another week, or they might come at dawn."

Kirby crouched around a fire with Sol Cannavan, roasting a piece of venison one of the hunters had brought in late that afternoon. Captain Donald came up and touched his shoulder.

"Bring Cannavan with you," he said softly.

Kirby straightened up and nodded to the giant. They walked away from the fire

to where Donald was waiting for them. Two saddled horses were stamping the ground nearby.

"I've received a note from General Jackson in New Orleans," the captain explained. "He wants to see you men."

"Us?" Cannavan blinked.

"I don't know what it's about," Donald told them, "but it must be important."

"How far away is the city?" Kirby wanted to know. He thought of the invitation Vivian Ralston had given him when she left. He still had the address of her home—No. 3 LaRue Street.

"You follow the levee road," Donald said. "With the horses you can make it in about ten minutes." He paused. "Ask for Jackson's headquarters. It's well known now."

When they'd mounted, Donald called. "Be careful in New Orleans. The Spanish and French spies infest every quarter of the town."

"French?" Kirby asked in surprise.

Donald grinned. "The French too would like to get back Louisiana," he explained. "Napoleon's been deposed and they feel the British can help them regain their territory which he sold."

Kirby Dall shook his head. New Orleans was full of French refugees from the revolution and from the Napoleonic persecutions. Intensely patriotic, they still maintained Louisiana was rightfully theirs.

"It belongs to us," Sol Cannavan said, "and three countries are tryin' to get it back."

THEY pounded along the levee road, parallel to the river. Anchored in midstream was the armed schooner "*Louisiana*" which Jackson had used to augment his land batteries against the British artillery.

Frogs croaked in the swamps along the water's edge, and up ahead they could see the twinkling lights of the city. They passed many small huts and hovels on the outskirts of the town before hitting a paved road.

Kirby dismounted at the first tavern and asked his way to Jackson's headquarters. The French tavern keeper blinked and then shrugged, understanding no English.

"Jackson," Kirby repeated. "General Jackson."

A Creole at the bar finally took them out and pointed the way. They located the building five minutes later, a uniformed Dragoon on guard.

"State your business, gentlemen," he grinned, bayonet at their chests.

"Dall and Cannavan of the Tennessee militia reporting," Kirby informed him. "General Jackson sent for us."

The guard stared at their hunting shirts and coonskin caps.

"First it's pirates," he grunted. "This is a hell of a war." Stepping inside the door, he passed the word to another Dragoon who went up the stairs to the second floor.

Kirby stood outside looking at the queer little old-world buildings with the shuttered windows and the balconies of iron-work.

"This ain't America," Sol Cannavan growled. "Why are we fightin' for it, Kirby?"

"Louisiana Territory," the lawyer explained, "consists of some of the finest farm land in the world. Some day twenty millions of people will live in it and prosper."

"There ain't that many in the States," Cannavan said.

The Dragoon held open the door for them. "The General is waiting," he said. "Upstairs."

They went up the narrow stairway, at the end of which was an open doorway. The room was large with a glass chandelier hanging from the center of the ceiling. Jackson sat at a desk in one corner. Two dark-visaged men stood by the window, staring at them curiously as they came in. One of the men, a short, stocky man and a wide grinning face, Kirby recognized as Dominique You, LaFitte's lieutenant.

The pirate cannoneer, Donald had informed them, was recently released from prison by Jackson to fight with the Americans.

"Gentlemen," the General nodded. "Come in. We've been waiting for you."

Kirby glanced at the tall, dark-haired man with the quiet brown eyes and the sideburns.

"Mr. LaFitte," Jackson introduced them, "and Dominique You, the best gunner in the country. Kirby Dall and Solomon Cannavan."

Kirby shook hands with the notorious

pirate. They were the same height, but LaFitte wasn't as broad in the shoulders.

"LaFitte," Jackson began, "is—"

"Is a pirate," the dark man said smoothly. "Proceed, General."

Jackson smiled. His long, thin face seemed even paler in the light of the candles.

"We will not harp over technicalities," he said grimly. "This is no time for it." He turned to the frontiersmen. "LaFitte has made a deal with the American army," he explained. "There has been a price on his head due to certain irregularities on the high seas. In return for a presidential pardon, he has joined his force of Baratarians with the United States."

Kirby Dall waited calmly, realizing that General Jackson had not called them in to listen to LaFitte's case.

"We have just received word," the General went on, "that Colonel Adair is on the way down the river with a thousand men from Kentucky—Kentucky riflemen," he added a little bitterly, "without rifles!"

"Without rifles?" Sol Cannavan boomed. "Kentuckians?"

KIRBY smiled with the General. A Kentuckian and the word "rifle" were synonymous.

"It appears," General Jackson went on grimly, "that Colonel Adair attempted to get down here in a tremendous hurry, for which I give him every credit. He had not time to equip his army and they will be marching into our lines tomorrow, more than half of them without weapons."

"It is regrettable," Kirby said. "Are there no guns to be had in New Orleans?"

"I have already contacted the mayor," Jackson informed him, "and we have located some rifles and a quantity of muskets—without flints."

"A musket without a flint," LaFitte said calmly, "is like a sword without a point."

"Mr. LaFitte," Jackson interposed, "has several thousand rifle flints in a cache in his beloved swamps below New Orleans. He has offered to donate them to the cause if someone can be procured to bring them in."

Kirby Dall's face showed his surprise. He looked at Sol Cannavan.

"I might add," General Jackson told them, "that New Orleans is filled with

spies who want to harass us as much as humanly possible. They have learned of the necessity of Colonel Adair's force; they know I have managed to secure weapons from the mayor, and they know that I need the flints."

"Since morning," LaFitte spoke up, "I have been shadowed in the city. The same has been true of Dominique. If we were to leave the city, we should be followed and it is possible the flints would be lost."

"We cannot take that chance," Jackson said flatly. "Those Kentuckians must be in the lines when the British infantry move up on us. We'll need every man available." He paused. "Captain Donald has informed me of your excellent work at Fort Lane and I think we can trust you to accomplish this task."

"You want us to bring in the flints?" Kirby asked.

Jackson nodded. "In the morning you will go back to the lines to avoid suspicion. This house is watched day and night."

"That swamp is big," Cannavan murmured.

"One of LaFitte's men will approach you tomorrow morning," Jackson smiled. "You will follow him to the cache and return with the flints as soon as possible."

"I need not advise you," LaFitte murmured, "to remain close to your guide. A stranger lost in the bayou country may wander till he sits down to die." Dominique You grinned from ear to ear.

"There are several hundred square miles of swampland below New Orleans," General Jackson explained, "and it is not the same country as your native Tennessee forests."

"We'll be careful," Kirby promised.

"Good luck," Jackson smiled. He held out his hand to both men. LaFitte walked with them out into the hall.

"You probably will be followed as you leave this house," he said quietly. "Do nothing to arouse suspicion."

"Very well," Kirby nodded.

At the door, the Dragoon said, "I suppose you boys are delegated to capture Pakenham himself."

"We're bringin' him back in a small box," Sol Cannavan grinned.

Kirby walked steadily up toward the corner of the street. Several of the houses had the shades and shutters drawn but they

could see the light shining through them.

"All right," Kirby said quietly when they reached the corner. "Let's go." He darted across the road and raced up the block.

"What in hell!" Cannavan panted.

"There was a man in the alley directly across the way from headquarter's building," Kirby said. "We might catch him before he comes out the other side."

They cut around the block and then Kirby ran full into a tall man nearly knocking him down. The street was deserted with the exception of the man in the dark cloak who had appeared suddenly in front of them.

"Pardon, *Monsieur*," he said softly. He had been knocked back against the wall of the building and was standing there in the shadows, black frock hat drawn over his face.

"Beaucamp!" Kirby ejaculated.

"Monsieur Dall," the Frenchman smiled. "You are in a great hurry, my friend." He came forward to shake hands.

"I expected to meet you in the city," Kirby said, "but not under these circumstances."

Armand Beaucamp nodded. "We presumed you would be with the Tennessee militia," he said. "I had intended going out to the lines tomorrow to look you up."

"You found us," Sol Cannavan grinned.

"I was returning to my quarters," Beaucamp explained, "after a visit with some friends. Would you care to join me?"

Kirby hesitated. "I'm not sure when we shall be in the city again," he said slowly.

Beaucamp smiled. "Miss Ralston would like to see you," he murmured. "I shall take you there, *Monsieur*. It is but a few minutes walk."

"We don't wish to trouble you, sir," Kirby protested.

"It is a pleasure," Beaucamp assured him, "and I must go the same route."

THEY walked past the alley which lead down to Jackson's headquarters, and Kirby managed to steal a quick glance down the narrow street. It was empty and he was sure no one had come out of it.

"Miss Ralston is in the best of health," the Frenchman advised, "and her father would be delighted to meet the men who saved the life of his daughter."

"If you hadn't saved our lives," Sol

Cannavan muttered, "we wouldn't have been able to do much about Miss Ralston."

Armand Beaucamp shrugged. He led them several blocks to the north and then one toward the west. The homes were more palatial along the new avenue. At a large iron gate, he stopped and shook hands cordially.

"We shall meet again, gentlemen," he said suavely. "I shall probably be in the battle myself."

"You are not coming in?" Kirby asked.

"Not tonight," Beaucamp smiled. "Give my best wishes to the young lady and her father."

Kirby watched the man swing up the sidewalk, cross the street and turn the corner.

"It's funny," Cannavan mumbled. "You think he came out of that alley, Kirby?"

"I couldn't be sure," the lawyer said quietly. "There were several doorways in the street and the spy may have stepped into any one of them."

They went up the flagged-stone path and Kirby lifted the knocker on the door. Several lights burned in the house, behind the usual shuttered windows. An iron balcony hung from each window with trailing vines dangling in the night breeze. A garden opened up behind the big house with several paths leading among a grove of cypress trees.

A colored servant with snow white hair opened the door and stared at their clothing in surprise.

"Mr. Kirby Dall," the lawyer said, "and Mr. Sol Cannavan. We would like to see Miss Ralston."

They heard the light step behind the colored man and then the dark-haired girl was standing before them.

"Mr. Dall" she smiled. "Please come in."

"We arrived this morning," Kirby told her. "This is our first night in the city." Sol Cannavan was grinning broadly.

"I wanted to bring him back to the line," the giant chuckled, "but he had other business, Miss."

Kirby Dall flushed under the tan. "We must return to the lines tonight," he explained, "and I thought we would take advantage of your kind invitation."

A portly man with a red face came down the stairs as they walked up the hallway.

Kirby Dall held his coonskin cap in his hands.

"My father," Vivian Ralston said. "Mr. Dall and Mr. Cannavan."

Kirby bowed. "It is a pleasure," he said.

Mr. Ralston shook hands with them warmly. "We welcome Tennessee to New Orleans," he smiled. "I was originally from that state myself."

"Mr. Beaucamp directed us to the house," Kirby told them. "We had the good fortune to meet him on the street." He noticed the sudden change in the father's eyes.

"Mr. Beaucamp," Ralston hurried on to say, "is ignoring the curfew General Jackson has instituted. I shall report him to the guard," he added with a grin.

"Curfew?" Kirby asked.

"New Orleans is under martial law," Mr. Ralston explained. "No citizen is permitted on the streets after nine o'clock." He glanced at a huge gold watch which he fished from his vest pocket. "It is now nearly ten, gentlemen."

The father led them toward the library and Kirby managed to stay behind for a word with the girl. Cannavan glanced back over his shoulder and then shrugged. Ralston was talking a blue streak about the war and national politics.

"How is my uncle Joseph," Vivian asked when they were alone.

"He is rebuilding his home," Kirby told her, "and directed me to send you his best regards."

"I should like to return to Tennessee again," the girl sighed.

"Our state will be honored," Kirby informed her, "and it will provide pleasure to some of its citizens."

"You pay a compliment," Miss Ralston smiled, "like a Creole gentleman. You should stay longer in our city."

"With you a resident," Kirby Dall ventured, "I shouldn't mind becoming a citizen." He saw the color come into her face.

"We had better go into the library, sir," Vivian murmured.

It was nearly midnight when they left and walked back to Jackson's headquarters for their mounts. Several times Kirby glanced back along the levee road, but saw nothing. Still the feeling persisted that

they were being watched and followed.

Captain Donald confronted them in the morning as they were squatting over a fire.

"I trust you had a pleasant evening," the officer smiled.

Kirby glanced toward a group of Baratarians strolling down along the line. Dominique You was with them, talking earnestly to a small dark-faced man with gold earrings and a long sharp nose.

"General Jackson is sending us on a mission into the swamps," Kirby said softly. "We shall probably have to leave in a few minutes, Captain Donald."

The red-haired man nodded. "Good luck," he said briefly. "Safe return."

As the Baratarians passed, the man with the earrings detached himself and strolled past their fire.

"Follow me, *Monsieurs*," he murmured.

Sol Cannavan threw another stick into the fire as the man passed on. "This is it," he said.

IX

KIRBY watched the pirate walk on the top of the parapet, glancing toward the British lines in the distance. The lawyer picked up his rifle and nodded to Captain Donald who was sitting on a log a dozen yards away.

Sol Cannavan followed him and they walked along behind the fortifications, chatting once or twice with a Greenvale man, but always keeping the pirate in sight.

He'd come to the end of the lines now and was following a foot path through the swamps. They passed a party of Choctaws sitting around a fire, cleaning their weapons. The red men eyed them quietly and then went on with their work.

"He's waitin' up ahead," Cannavan said.

Kirby saw the small man motioning to them as he stood beneath an ancient cypress tree on a dry spot of ground. All around them stretched the swamps—black water channels, stretches of tall marsh grass higher than a man's head, clumps of swamp cypress. They could hear the ducks splashing in the water to their left; a giant pelican sailed overhead.

"My friends," the pirate grinned. "I am Miquel. You will follow me."

"How far?" Kirby asked.

"We should reach the cache by late

afternoon," Miquel advised confidently.

"We walk through this water?" Sol Cannavan growled.

"Fortunately," Miquel told them "there is a boat." He led the way down the path and then pushed away the reeds revealing a scow with a set of oars and a long pole.

"At least we'll keep our feet dry," Cannavan said.

Both men climbed in and Miquel took the oars, rowing them across a short expanse of black water and then poling through a narrow channel. The process was repeated a dozen times, the pirate finding the channels with unerring accuracy.

There were no more trees now, only stretches of a stagnant water and the high marsh grass. It was impossible to see any distance even by standing up in the boat, yet the pirate seemed to know the direction.

Another hour of rowing and poling and they came to a cypress grove, trees festooned with streamers of moss. A flock of ducks fluttered up as they moved closer to the oasis.

Miquel, the pirate, stopped poling suddenly and listened. Distinctly, Kirby Dall heard it also—the soft slap of oars in the water, and the clank of oarlocks.

"Bayou Bienvenue," Miquel murmured. "British ships landing more men from the boats."

The pirate pushed the boat closer to the shore and they stepped out stiffly.

"For my part," Sol Cannavan said, "I like dry land."

"We'll take a look at the British," Kirby told him. "Any news we bring back might be of interest to General Jackson."

Miquel led them across the little island and they peered through the reeds, catching glimpses of bright red cloth through the green. Not more than thirty yards away, so close that they could hear the British soldiers talking, boat after boat was moving through the channel, sailors pulling the oars.

The occupants of the long boats were tall, red-faced men, for the most part light-haired, blue-eyed. Kirby recognized the brogue. The soldiers wore kilts and red jackets.

"Highlanders," the lawyer murmured. "Scotland's best."

A dozen ship's boats passed by before Miquel touched their shoulders.

"No wonder Pakenham hasn't attacked," Cannavan growled, "with these boys still on the transports."

They went back to their own boat and the pirate pushed away from the grove again out into the sea of high grass and water. They had progressed about another mile into the swamp when Miquel again stopped to listen.

"Someone is following us," he said quietly.

Kirby Dall picked up his rifle and loosened the knife in his belt.

"Turn aside out of the channel," he ordered. "We'll get a look at them when they come up."

Miquel poled the boat into the grass and then pulled the reeds across the hiding place. The three men lay down on the bottom of the boat.

AFTER waiting five minutes they heard the second boat sliding through the grass, and then low voices. Kirby Dall lifted his head slightly. The nose of the following craft was but a few yards away as it pushed by. It was a longer boat than theirs, equipped with two sets of oars. Five men, two in the green uniform of British skirmishers, and three men in buckskin.

Kirby held his breath as he caught a glimpse of the powerful figure in the bow. The man next to him had a scar down his cheek.

"I reckon they ain't very far ahead now, Captain Crofton," Ty Gurlap muttered. "The cache is supposed to be around here."

The British officer, a slim man with blond hair and a blond mustache, nodded impatiently. He slapped at the mosquitos buzzing around his head.

"I don't relish splashing through these infernal swamps," he snapped. "If you know where these flints are, lead us to them."

"We got directions from one o' them damned pirates," Gurlap growled angrily. "That's all I know, mister. This ain't my country either."

The boat moved past the hiding place and Kirby Dall relaxed. He looked into the tense face of Sol Cannavan.

"I figured we'd find them skunks down around here," the giant snarled. "He's workin' for the British now."

"Men like Gurlap," Kirby said quietly, "work for money—not for men." He paused. "They must have learned about the flints from one of LaFitte's men and passed the news along to the British."

"They'll get their blood money too," Cannavan scowled, "if they bring the stuff in."

Kirby turned to Miquel. "They don't seem to know where the cache it," he said quickly. "Can you get us there without them seeing us?"

"Si—Si," Miquel grinned. "There is another channel."

Kirby smiled. "You are Spanish, *Senor*?" he asked.

Miquel shook his head. "We are of all nations," he grinned, "we men of Barataria. We speak all languages and we obey none but LaFitte." He sent the boat sliding through the grass again, cutting directly across the path taken by Gurlap's boat.

It was another hour before they landed on an oasis in the center of the marsh. A dozen tall trees reared up out of the grass, like all other trees in the bayou country, dripping with Spanish moss.

It was impossible to see what was on the island until they were close to it. The tall grass grew directly up to the shore, opening then on a rickety wooden pier, with a board walk leading back to a board shack in the center of the island.

"This is the cache," Miquel grinned. "The flints are under the floor of the house." He pushed the boat close up to the pier and Kirby Dall stepped out.

"We won't waste any time," he said grimly. "Gurlap might stumble across this spot any minute."

Miquel fingered the pistol in his belt. "That *hombre*," he chuckled, "might stumble into a pistol ball if he is not more careful."

They ran up the boarded walk over the mud and Miquel pushed open the door. The house was very small, thatched with padmettos, and with the usual Creole blinds on the windows. It had evidently been used as a hide-out by LaFitte or his men.

The guide bent down in the center of the floor and lifted two loose boards. Bending down, he came up with two wooden boxes about two feet square.

"The flints, gentlemen," he chuckled.

Sol Cannavan lifted one of the cases on

his shoulders and stepped out of the door. He paused for a moment in a patch of sunlight slanting down through the trees. Kirby Dall, following, saw the big man suddenly drop the box and leap for his rifle which he'd leaned against the outside wall of the house.

"Gurlap!" he yelled.

Kirby snatched up his own gun and leaped outside. A boat had just slipped into the shore from the other side of the island. Ty Gurlap was stepping out of the craft when he spied Cannavan walking out of the shack with the box of flints.

One of the British army men lifted a musket and the roar of the gun resounded through the quiet swamplands. Ty Gurlap was yelling and reaching for his own weapons. The boat was about ten yards from the house.

Kirby heard the musket ball smash through the thin boards a little to his left, the lead having missed Cannavan by an inch. The giant instinctively fired at the man with the gun, his shot catching the skirmisher squarely between the eyes and knocking him into the water.

Cannavan yelled and rushed toward the boat, brandishing the long rifle as a club, realizing it was impossible to reload at this distance.

KIRBY DALL fired a moment after Cannavan's shot, his bullet catching Captain Crofton, the blond man, in the shoulder and knocking the musket out of his hands.

Before Ty Gurlap could get his rifle up, Cannavan was on top of them like a huge cat, rifle stock smashing the three remaining men. Kirby followed him, stumbling over a tree root as he ran.

The accidental fall saved him as the scar-faced man in the boat snapped a pistol, the ball whizzing over Kirby's head. The lawyer heard a short cry behind him.

Regaining his feet, he tumbled into the long boat, swinging the rifle at the nearest head. Gurlap was already down in the bottom of the boat, his skull split, the blood sinking into the boards.

Kirby hit the scar-faced man, cutting open his cheek and sending him over the side of the boat. The water turned crimson as the renegade went under.

Cannavan disposed of the remaining man

in short order, knocking him unconscious with the rifle stock as he tried to get in close with a hunting knife.

In a few seconds the fight was over. Kirby Dall stood with the upraised rifle in his hands, watching the British officer carefully. Captain Crofton had taken a ball through the right shoulder and he'd slumped down on the seat, his face the picture of disgust.

"You've won the bloody fight," he snapped peevishly. "There was no sense to your mission in the first place. It makes no difference whether you Americans have a thousand or two thousand riflemen behind those beastly mud walls."

Sol Cannavan lowered his rifle and took a deep breath. "I'm thinkin', mister," he muttered, "some of you boys will be in for a surprise."

Kirby Dall picked up the officer's gun and tossed it into the water. He did the same with the remaining rifles in the boat. Gurlap was dead; the scar-faced man had never come up from the swamp water. The British skirmisher with Captain Crofton had died instantly from Sol Cannavan's shot. Only two men remained alive in the boat, and one was unconscious, the other wounded in the shoulder and incapacitated.

Kirby turned suddenly and ran back to the shack. He found Miquel the pirate, lying on his face, arms extended, the pistol still in his right hand. The stray ball directed at Kirby had caught the man in the forehead, killing him a second later.

Back at the boat, Captain Crofton was still talking as Sol Cannavan tried to extract the ball from his shoulder. It was a painful operation but the Britisher took it stolidly, though the perspiration poured down his face.

"Why General Keane sent me on this mission is more than I can understand," he scowled. "With two thousand men we can make you rabble run. You've had no training; you've no discipline—"

"We have Andy Jackson," Cannavan grinned. "Ever hear of him, mister?"

"A backwoods lawyer," Crofton scoffed. "Pakenham will send him back to his law books."

"Miquel's dead," Kirby said as Cannavan bandaged the wounded man's shoulder with a strip of his shirt.

"Dead?" Cannavan gulped. He straightened up and stared over the sea of marsh grass. "How in hell do we get out of here, Kirby?"

"We'll have to blunder through," the lawyer said. He looked at Crofton. "We'll arrange to send men back for you," he stated, "when we reach our own lines."

"You needn't bother," Crofton muttered. "My man can get the boat back to the bayou when he recovers. I don't have any desire to be made an American prisoner."

"As you wish," Kirby nodded. "It is necessary that we leave immediately." He noticed the numerals "95" on the captain's arm, a rifle beneath.

They went back to the shack and picked up the two boxes, Captain Crofton watching them sourly.

"My regards to Mr. Jackson," he called bitterly. "I'll see him on a British prison ship bound for London."

Kirby Dall walked down the board path, the heavy case held across his chest, Lancaster rifle lying across the box. Sol Cannavan brought up the rear with the second box of flints, stumbling and swearing under his breath as he went down the uneven walk.

"You got any idea which way we go?" the giant mumbled. "This swamp all looks alike to me."

"We head north," Kirby explained, "and we try to keep the sun on our left." He placed his box in the bow of the boat.

"What happens," Cannavan growled, "when the sun goes down in maybe two hours?"

"You won't have to worry about that, *Monsieur*," a voice said from the tall grass on their right.

KIRBY DALL straightened up and mechanically grabbed at the rifle.

"No," Armand Beaucamp snapped. "I should hate to kill you, Mr. Dall." The Frenchman stepped out of the high reeds, a pistol in each hand, his jaws set tight.

"Beaucamp" Sol Cannavan stared, open-mouthed.

"I regret," Beaucamp told them, "that in this instance I must operate against you gentlemen." He took a step closer. "You will please put the two boxes in my boat." He nodded with his head to another row-

boat lying in the rushes a few yards from their own craft.

Kirby Dall smiled coldly. "Of what value are these flints to you, *Monsieur*?" he asked.

"My government," Beaucamp told them calmly, "feels that these cases of flints may prove a detriment to the British army, and it is necessary that the British win the battle of New Orleans."

"Your government?" Kirby lifted his eyebrows. "You were living on American soil, *Monsieur*."

Armand Beaucamp smiled. "Permit me," he said easily. "I am not a citizen of the United States and never have been. The Spanish government sent me to New Orleans to operate with the British."

"You're a Frenchman," Sol Cannavan snapped.

Beaucamp shook his head. "I am Captain Jose Ferrara of the Spanish army," he smiled. "Now, gentlemen, the flints."

Kirby made no offer to pick up his box. "You Spanish feel that if the British take away the Louisiana Territory from us that they will return it to you?"

Captain Ferrara shrugged. "I am a military man," he explained. "It is not part of my duty to interpret the feelings of my superiors." He cocked the two pistols. "Now place the boxes in my boat and drop your rifles into the water, gentlemen."

"Damn," Cannavan muttered.

"You will remember how well I shoot with the pistols," Ferrara said quietly. "It is an accomplishment of which I am very proud." He paused. "It doesn't give me pleasure to work against the Americans for whom I have the most profound respect, but this is a case of war, gentlemen."

Kirby nodded. "I too consider it a misfortune that we are not on the same side, *Señor*." He bent down for the box and lifted it in front of his chest, realizing that with these four thousand flints Captain Ferrara could very well tip the balance to the side of the British. Five hundred less riflemen in the American line might enable the crack British infantry to make a breach in the Rodriguez line.

"I will leave your boat with you," Captain Ferrara told them, stepping back to let Kirby pass, "and I wish you success in reaching your own force."

"Thank you, Captain," Kirby Dall said quietly. Very carefully he measured the distance, looking into the muzzles of the two pistols. Ferrara was less than two yards away. He remembered that the Spaniard had knocked down a Creek Indian at fifty yards while the man was on the run.

There was a distance of five yards between the two boats. Kirby took two steps and then glanced down at the marshy ground to see where he should take the next step.

Without looking up, he knew Ferrara's eyes would drop automatically. Gripping the heavy box with both hands, he suddenly pushed it away from him, thrusting it at the Spanish officer's chest.

Taken completely by surprise, Ferrara yelled and stumbled back, one of the pistols going off with a loud roar. Kirby Dall felt the ball cut through his hunting jacket.

Jose Ferrara never had time to fire the second pistol. Kirby was on top of him, raining heavy fists into the man's face, battering him back against the trunk of a tree.

Against this kind of an assault, the Spaniard never had a chance. At their first meeting, Ferrara had intimated that he had no proficiency with his fists. Kirby Dall grinned as he remembered it.

The pistols dropped from Ferrara's limp hands as he slid down to the ground, blood streaming from his mouth. Sol Cannavan leaped in and picked up the guns.

Kirby Dall stepped back and stared at the limp figure on the ground.

"He's a brave man," the lawyer murmured, "and a good fighter. This country could use men like him."

Cannavan picked up the heavy case with which Kirby had upset the Spaniard. He placed it in their own boat and then tossed the two pistols after it.

"I don't figure he'll follow us, Kirby," the giant muttered. "It'll take him a little time to get himself together."

Kirby stepped into the boat and they pushed out from the shore. In a matter of seconds they were out in the marsh grass, moving into an open channel. Sol Cannavan picked up the oars.

"I'm afraid o' this place," the big man mumbled. "We're a long way from Jackson's army, Kirby."

The young lawyer stood up in the boat and tried to peer over the grass. It was impossible.

"We'll try to head north," he said quietly, "and hope we get out of it."

AN HOUR'S steady poling and rowing, moving around countless islands in the marsh, got them more confused than ever. Kirby slapped at the mosquitos and stared at the setting sun. It was impossible to tell how far they'd gone. The winding channels all looked alike and although the sun was still on their left, it was possible they had been heading due west or due east.

"LaFitte told us not to get lost," Cannavan scowled. "I'm thinkin' we did it, Kirby." He put down the pole and took a long breath. His buckskin shirt was wet with perspiration. It was hot and sticky in the swamps.

"We must get these flints in tonight or tomorrow morning at the latest," Kirby Dall said flatly. "General Jackson is depending on us." Again, he stood up in the boat and stared around. He was about to sit down again when he caught a glimpse of red far up a narrow water channel. A moment later, he could hear the soft jangle of an oar lock. Sol Cannavan heard it at the same time.

"The Bayou Bienvenue," the giant murmured. "That's where the British are movin' up from their ships, Kirby."

Kirby rubbed his jaw and then pointed to the channel. "Push it through there, Sol," he said quietly.

The giant's eyes popped. "We'll go right into them British" he objected.

"They know how to get out of this swamp," Kirby said. "Pole the boat, Sol."

Cannavan picked up the pole again. He scratched his head.

"I'll do the talking," Kirby told him. "We can't afford to spend a week paddling around here. The battle may be over in another day."

Slowly, the giant pushed the boat down the grassy channel. They could hear voices now and see the long ship's boats crowded with the red-coated troops.

"Wait," Kirby whispered. Another boat was coming up about twenty-five yards behind the one carrying the British infantry.

The second craft contained colored soldiers.

"West Indian troops," Kirby said quietly. "We'll slip in between two of their boats."

Cannavan nodded and cleared his throat. As the first boat containing the West Indians slipped by, he pushed the row boat through the reeds and maneuvered it in behind the British boat.

A fat-faced white officer in command of the colored battalion suddenly stood up in the bow of the craft ahead of them. He stared suspiciously. Kirby Dall stood up also. The British army had a number of renegade Americans serving as scouts.

The British officer's hand was on the pistol in the holster at his side.

"Who are you?" he demanded loudly.

"Scouts attached to Captain Crofton's Ninety-fifth Rifles," Kirby yelled back. He spat in the water. "We're carrying dispatches for General Keane."

The officer nodded and sat down again. Many of the colored soldiers had turned their heads to look and grin, white-teeth flashing. Sol Cannavan sat down on the seat and picked up the oars. Perspiration trickled down his cheek.

"So far so good," he breathed. "Now we got to go through the whole British camp, Kirby."

Kirby Dall nodded. "Keep rowing," he said softly. "They don't suspect us."

It was nightfall when they reached the vast encampment of the British army. Boat after boat slid through the grass and was tied up as the troopers clambered out. Hundreds of fires twinkled; many small white tents had been erected for the use of the officers.

Around each fire sat a half dozen or more troopers, cleaning muskets or sharpening bayonets. Couriers raced here and there with orders and dispatches. No one took notice of the two buckskin clad men as they picked up their boxes and stepped out of the row boat.

Other boats were being unloaded all along the bank of the channel. Men with heavy loads staggered through the wet grass toward huge piles of provisions.

"We're here," Sol Cannavan said softly. "Now what?"

"Walk right through the camp," Kirby told him. "We'll head for the picket lines which face our own army. If they stop us,

we'll have to make a fast run for it."

Cannavan took a deep breath. With the boxes on their shoulders, they walked among the fires. A big red-faced officer stumbled against Cannavan and cursed loudly. Kirby Dall held his breath, but the Britisher didn't stop.

"Everybody's in such a damn hurry," the giant murmured.

"It might mean they're attacking tomorrow morning," Kirby told him. "We won't be too soon."

"If we get through," Cannavan chuckled.

THE CAMP was already thinning out. Up ahead, in the darkness, they could make out the vague lines of a white building.

"Where are we?" Cannavan asked.

"The Lacoste mansion," Kirby said quietly. "Our lines are about eight hundred yards ahead."

"Eight hundred yards," Cannavan breathed. "I wish it were eight hundred miles of Tennessee forest."

They passed the last fire and Kirby turned away from the big plantation house, heading for a patch of trees to the left. In the orchard, they squatted down a moment to rest.

"If one of us goes down," Kirby said slowly, "the other is to keep running with his box."

"I don't like it that way," Cannavan mumbled.

"It's best," Kirby Dall said. They stood up again and flattened against the trees. A soldier passed within fifteen yards of them, his bayonet reflecting in the light of the campfire behind. "All right," Kirby whispered.

As the sentry passed, they slipped through the trees and started to run. Kirby heard the loose flints inside his box rattle loudly. A moment later a voice snapped, "Halt"

"Like hell," Cannavan breathed. "Let's go, Kirby."

Another soldier loomed up in front of them, bayonet thrust toward them. Sol Cannavan lowered the case across the front of his body and ran straight for the man.

The Britisher lunged in the darkness with the bayonet, the point of the knife driving into the wooden case. Cannavan piled into the man, knocking him to the

ground, the force of his charge ripping the musket from the picket's hands.

As the sentry went down, he let out a yell. Immediately, a gun cracked and the ball sang over their heads.

"Come on," Kirby Dall grated. They fled through the picket line, running like mad for the distant American fortifications. Guns exploded behind them and Kirby heard Sol Cannavan grunt.

"Hit?" he asked anxiously.

"Scratched the back o' my neck," Cannavan panted. "It itches."

Several of the sentries had taken up the chase, but as they drew near to the American lines, they gave it up. The rude breastworks General Jackson had thrown up, loomed directly ahead of them. They could hear voices.

"Who's there?" a challenge came.

"Don't shoot" Kirby yelled. "We're Americans!"

They kept running until they nearly tumbled down into the canal bed. Men scrambled down into the ditch to help them up. Kirby Dall retained his grip on the box of precious flints.

"Jackson at the lines?" he asked anxiously.

"Kirby Dall!" a voice cried in astonishment. Captain Donald rushed over to his side. "Where did you men come from?"

"Right through the whole British camp," Cannavan grinned, "like we was generals!"

"Where's General Jackson?" Kirby asked again. "Is he in New Orleans?"

"He's at the Macarte House," Donald informed him. "I'll take you there." The plantation house was two hundred yards behind the lines and Jackson was using it for his headquarters at the battlefield.

The thin-faced general smiled at them when they came in with the boxes. He listened to their story, blue eyes lighting up with interest.

"We're quite sure," Kirby explained, "that the British are planning an attack tomorrow morning. Every sign pointed to it."

Jackson sent the two boxes of flints out with a note to Colonel Adair of the Kentuckians.

"We're ready for them," he said grimly. "This country owes you men a vote of thanks."

"I'm sure," Kirby said quietly, "there'll

be many others deserving of the same after tomorrow morning, sir."

General Andrew Jackson studied the tall man before him and then held out his hand.

"I'm glad," he said simply, "that I'm not with the British forces when they attempt to storm these breastworks. I know my lines will hold."

A MIST hung over the stubble field now white with frost. Kirby Dall stood in the third line of Tennessee riflemen, Lancaster rifle ready. Sol Cannavan glanced back at him from the trench. Cannavan, one of the best shots in the army, was assigned a position in the front of the line.

Four divisions of riflemen, the best shots in the world, waited for the British advance. Colonels Coffee and Carroll had given their orders and assigned their men. The best shots were to fire first and then retire to reload; the second and then the third lines were to step into positions while the others reloaded.

"The British will be marching into a continuous wall of fire," Captain Donald said quietly. "I wouldn't want to be in their boots."

Kirby Dall nodded. The artillery from the British side opened up as the red-coated troops advanced through the mist, bayonets gleaming. The American gunners opened fire also, but still the British infantry came on, two compact columns, moving forward on the double-quick, coming up along the bank of the river and straight toward the Tennessee and Kentucky lines.

"They're running right into a cross-fire from these rifles," Donald said.

General Jackson moved by, stopping now and then to look through his field glasses. His eyes swept over the four rows of riflemen and Kirby Dall saw the grim pleasure.

The British columns in the fore carried ladders and fascines to get them over the breastworks. They could be seen more plainly now, red jackets, latticed by white cross-belts.

"That attack by the river," Donald muttered, "is a feint. The main body of troopers is coming up this way—right for us, Kirby."

At about two hundred yards, the Amer-

icans opened fire. Coolly, they poked the long barrels over the breastworks sighted and fired. Then stepping aside, another line moved into position.

The Britishers with the ladders had dropped them and tried to fire back. Officers on horseback waved swords and tried to gather their men for a charge. They were being mowed down like hay in a field. Sheets of orange flame broke from the American lines—flashed and then flashed again.

Isolated groups of British troops got within fifty and then twenty-five yards of the American fortifications before the deadly fire of the riflemen knocked them down.

Riderless horses raced frantically among the dead, their owners, trained British officers, dead on the field of battle.

Kirby Dall fired at a line of moving men picking out his target as did the others. The line disappeared and it had been sixty men wide! Stepping out of the trench to reload, Kirby heard Captain Donald say, "This is slaughter! Why don't they stop?"

"Here comes Pakenham himself!" a man yelled, "an' the men with the skirts!"

"The Ninety-third Highlanders!" Donald mumbled. "Scotland's best!"

Bravely the Scotsmen moved up to the front, kilts swinging, every man over six feet tall. Sir Edward Pakenham rode with them, a gallant figure on a white horse.

Again that breath of death from the American line—orange colored, leaving in its wake a field strewn with bodies.

The first volley and a white horse trotted away without a rider.

"Pakenham's down!" Captain Donald shouted.

Still the Scotsmen came on, moving with surprising speed, picking their way among the limp bodies of the men who had fallen ahead of them. They came within fifty and then twenty-five yards of the lines. A dozen of them scrambled down into the ditch and up the other side. Hundreds had fallen behind them.

One man, a big sandy-haired trooper with a freckled face, came over the breastworks, his body riddled with American bullets. Kirby Dall caught him as he fell forward, bayonet digging into the hard-packed earth. The man was dead when he dropped.

Kirby fell back to permit the man behind him to take position. The Ninety-third Highlanders were still on the field—many of them running up to the very walls before they went down.

"These men licked Napoleon," Captain Donald said in awe. Four-fifths of their number lay on the ground. The remainder finally broke and retreated.

"It's over" Donald said grimly. Powder smoke still drifted across the cane stubble field. Over two thousand British troopers lay on the ground, the pride of an empire broken.

The column by the river had come up close to the line, taking one battery, and then retreating when the Highlanders broke.

Faces blackened, gun barrels hot, the riflemen of Tennessee and Kentucky stared at the destruction they had wrought. Sol Cannavan turned away, sick to the stomach.

"We've lost about three men in our ranks," Captain Donald half-whispered. "Maybe a dozen casualties in all! There never has been such a defeat in the history of warfare!

Kirby Dall watched the retreating troopers. Practically every British officer had been killed; whole regiments had been wiped out. Sir Edward Pakenham was dead, lying among the Scotsmen who had given their all.

"They don't come any braver," Donald murmured.

Mechanically, Kirby Dall reloaded the Lancaster. There was little talk among the men in the line. Stupefied, they gazed at that field where Britain's finest had gone down. Several redcoated figures lay on the top of the breastworks, arms dangling, reaching for the enemy.

"I hope," Donald spoke quietly, "this is the last time an American fights an Englishman."

TWO DAYS later Kirby Dall and Sol Cannavan rode up the levee road toward New Orleans. It was reported the British army was embarking and sailing away.

"I figure we don't have to worry about Louisiana Territory any more," Cannavan muttered. "It's as safe now as the state of New York."

Kirby nodded. At Jackson's headquarters they delivered the dispatches from Colonel Coffee and then headed for the Ralston house. Captain Donald having given them the day off.

Briefly, Kirby recounted to Mr. Ralston and his daughter, the episode with Beaucamp, or Jose Ferrara.

"I had suspected him," Mr. Ralston said a little grimly. I suppose he had his task to perform like the rest of us."

"It was Ferrara's misfortune," Kirby smiled, "to be born a Spaniard. I am sure he would have preferred fighting on our side." He watched Vivian Ralston's face closely as he told his story. He noticed the fear in her eyes when he recounted the fight.

"Mr. Ferrara will probably be back in New Orleans after the war," he said quietly. "He was unharmed and knew his way out of the swamp."

"I am glad," Miss Ralston smiled at him. "I should not like to see Mr. Ferrara killed." They were standing alone on the porch as Cannavan and Mr. Ralston, walked down to the gate. As he turned, the girl touched his arm.

"You think I was afraid Mr. Ferrara would be killed?" she asked softly.

Kirby looked at her. "Weren't you?" he asked.

"I was afraid," she said softly, "he would kill you, Mr. Dall."

"No!" Kirby blinked.

"Yes," Vivian Ralston told him. "Now you may go, sir." He saw her face redden at the confession she had been forced to make.

"I'll be back," the lawyer grinned, "and often. Maybe some day to stay."

"New Orleans will be honored," Vivian said.

"How about you?" Kirby wanted to know.

"I—I shall be much pleased," the girl stammered.

"For the present," Kirby murmured, "that will suffice." He kissed her quietly and then reluctantly walked down the path. Looking back, he noticed that she was smiling.

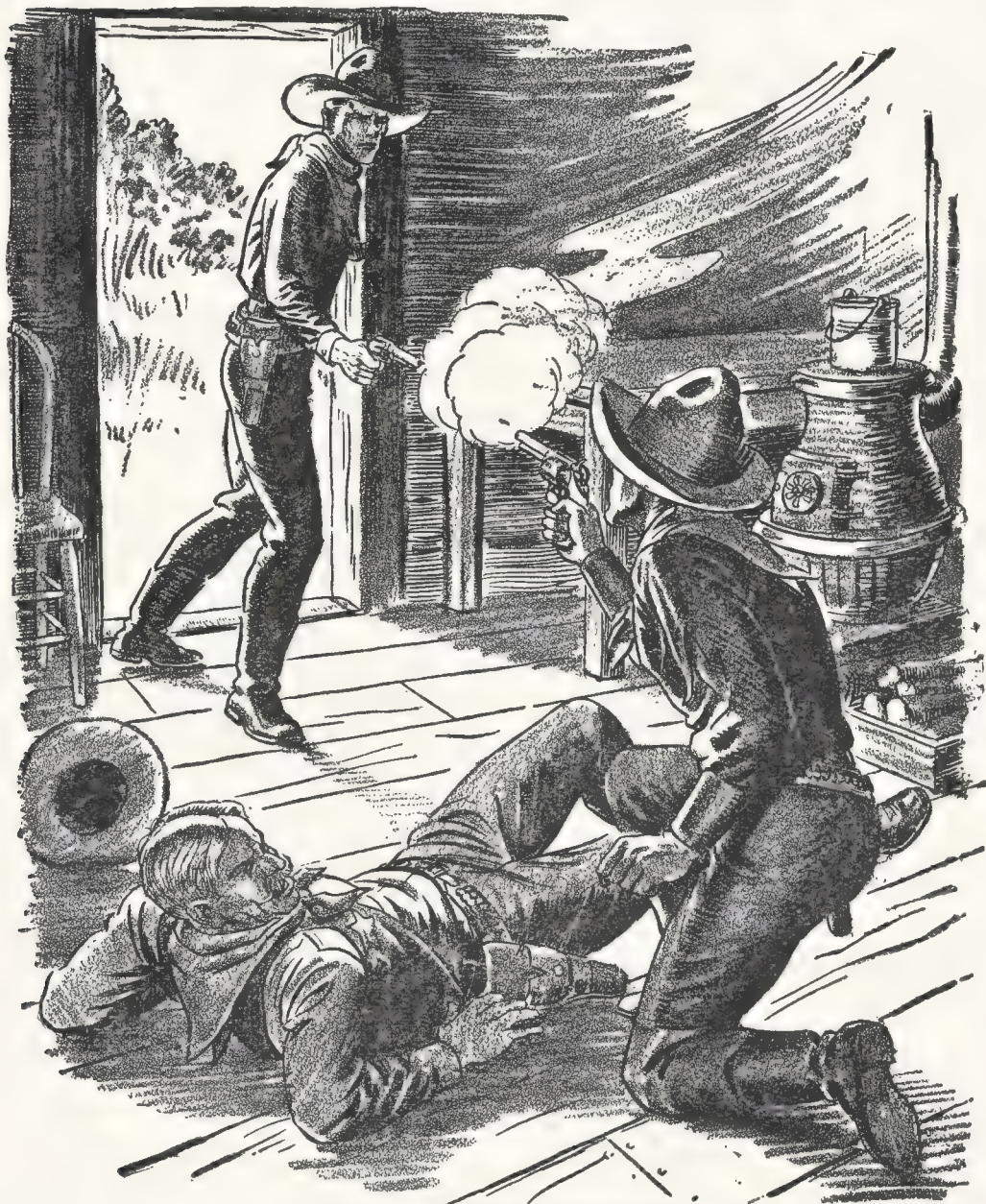
"Saying 'good-bye'?" Cannavan grinned.

"No," the lawyer explained. "Saying 'hello'."

OWLHOOT PHANTOM

by Ben Frank

Johnny James had a theory about the elusive Jock Pete, an idea that would prove the owlhooter didn't exist—only somewhere in his reasoning he was making a slip.



Their guns hammered death in a twin roar of sound.

JOHNNY JAMES jerked the cinch tight, then put one big, square hand on the roan's rump and grinned down at Shorty Wells.

"Do you wantta know what I think

about Jock Pete?" he drawled slowly.

With deadly accuracy, Shorty Wells shot a slender stream of tobacco juice at a horsefly on the hitch rail.

"No," he wheezed. "I don't give a

hoot. But go ahead if you wantta talk."

"I don't think there is such a hombre as Jock Pete."

Shorty swallowed half a cud. "Yo're plain loco!" he snorted. "Who do yuh think held up the Sho-sho Bank? Who killed the deputy in Red Rock Pass? Who robbed the stage—ah, hell, I can name a dozen hold-ups and killin's that Jock Pete has did."

The long-boned Johnny James swung into the saddle, and the roan skittered in a circle, tramping up a spray of fine dust.

"I think," he went on, "that them acts of unlawfulness you are mentionin' was done by several different gents. I think Jock Pete is just a name that some owl-hooters invented so's to keep the lawmen lookin' for someone who just ain't."

"Why do I think so? Simple. Nobody can agree on what this Jock Pete looks like. Oh, sure, they say he's tall and has arms and legs. Put a mask on me, or a dozen other jaspers in Jupiter Junction, and we'd all answer that description."

Shorty spit again. "If yo're right, I reckon Sheriff Frame's wastin' a lot of time in Lost Canyon. But yo're loco"

Johnny adjusted his gun belt and shoved the old .44 snugly into the holster. "So long, cactus-puss," he grinned and headed down the hot street of Jupiter Junction for the open country.

As he came opposite Cal Ott's general store, a tall girl ran out into the street toward him. Her hair gleamed like ripe wheat in the sun, and her eyes were the blue of an evening desert sky.

Johnny pulled the Stetson off his shock of red hair and grinned down at her and felt his heart do a flip-flop.

"Johnny," Sonny Frame, Sheriff Frame's daughter, said, and he saw the worry in her upturned face, "Johnny, I heard you were riding over to the Bar-B today."

"Sure am," he told her. "Goin' to do some bronc bustin' for old man Barnett."

"I'm worried about dad," she went on. "He's been gone two days, looking for this Jock Pete."

"Don't worry," he said. "Jock Pete's just a name."

"Even if that's so, I'm worried," Sonny said. "Lost Canyon's a mean place with

all those loose rocks and crevices. I know it's out of your way to go that way, but—"

"That's the way I intended to go all the time," he lied. "Cooler ridin' through the canyon than out on the uplands."

"Thanks, Johnny," she smiled. "I'll feel better, knowing you'll go that way."

CLOUDS were piling into Lost Canyon when Johnny James turned off the upper trail and rode through the slit in the bluff that led into the canyon. A few minutes later, a tongue of lightning forked across the rolling cloud bank, and the thunder rocked back and forth between the high walls. A drop of rain batted him on his long, freckled nose. He didn't like canyon storms, so he turned off into a gulch that widened into a small meadow. A few stunted pines clustered around an old shed and a log cabin. Ever since Johnny could remember, old Hunter's cabin had been empty.

He put the roan in the shed and hurried toward the cabin. Big drops pitted the dust, and another lance of fire zig-zagged through the sky.

The thunder boomed just as he opened the cabin door. The wet wind whipped in behind him. He shoved the door shut—and saw Sheriff Frame, his stocky body propped up in the far corner of the room.

The sheriff's clothes were blood spattered. His head rolled sideways, and his eyes lifted to Johnny's face. He groaned then, and his face tightened with pain.

Johnny caught a movement in the gloom of the windowless end of the cabin. He whipped about and saw the man standing in the shadows, a black sixgun in his fist. The man stepped forward. He was long-legged and thin-lipped. He didn't have on a hat, and his hair was black and oily. His narrowed eyes seemed without color.

He didn't utter a word. He didn't have to. The rock-like steadiness of the black gun spoke for him. Johnny's hands went up shoulder high, and he felt his spine tingle like he had a handful of chipped ice down his neck.

The man's slit of a mouth moved slightly. "Looks like we got us a visitor," he said.

The rain suddenly cut loose. The one window rattled hollowly. A trickle of

water dribbled through a hole in the clapboard roof and puddled on the rough pine floor just at the toe of Johnny's right boot. He remembered that these were new boots and wondered if they'd leak. A hell of a thing to think of at a time like this.

"Who are you?" the man rasped.

Johnny's throat was dry. He had to swallow twice before he could speak. "Just a hoss wrangler, goin' through—"

Sheriff Frame moved, groaned and toppled forward. The man crossed to where he lay in two long-legged strides, reached down and hefted him back into the corner, his black gun never once wavering from the pit of Johnny's stomach.

"Too bad you come," the man lipiped, "'cause I'll have to kill you, too!"

He raised the gun until it centered on Johnny's heart.

Johnny James suddenly knew that death had a noose on him and was about ready to jerk it tight. He knew by the expression in the washed-out eyes, and he wasn't ready to die. He had a lot to live for. He was young—and there was Sonny Frame.

He nodded toward Sonny's father, slumped in the corner. "Who's that old jasper?" he stalled.

The man's finger relaxed. "Don't you know?"

Johnny's hands dropped a couple of inches. He glanced at Sheriff Frame. He was sitting with his knees drawn up under his chin, his head sagging, a blood-clotted gash making an ugly black wound across his white hair. Then he saw Frame wink and knew that he wasn't hurt as badly as he let on.

"How should I know," he countered. "Just rode into this country. Had to get out of the Sho-sho country in a hurry. Come down here, thinkin' maybe I could hole up until—"

"Just who are you, hombre?" the man rasped.

"Maybe I'd like to know who you are before—"

"You ain't got much time to talk," the man interrupted.

"I don't know you," Johnny said. "I got to be careful—"

"Quit stallin'! What's your handle?"

Johnny managed a slow grin. He'd thought of the right answer, maybe.

"They call me Jock Pete!" he said.

The slitted eyes widened. The thin lips puckered into an evil grin. The gun wavered, lowered until it pointed at the floor.

"Jock Pete!" he exploded. "I'll be damned!"

Sheriff Frame's legs straightened with pile-driving force and kicked the man's feet out from under him.

JOHNNY'S hand went for the old .44 crammed down in the holster. The man caught himself on his left arm. His black gun came up, blasting wildly. Johnny got the .44 free. There was another blast from the black gun, and a red hot flame scorched Johnny's ribs. Then his own gun rocked in his square fist, and the man grabbed at his chest, tried to get on his feet and then fell forward on his face.

Johnny suddenly felt cold all over. His hand came away from the bullet scratch in his side, sticky red. It had been close.

Sheriff Frame staggered to his feet. "Nice shootin', Johnny," he said. "Reckon if you hadn't come when you did, I'd be dead by now. An hour ago, my hoss got his foot in a crevice and threw me. Shook me up and cut my head. Bled pretty bad. Managed to crawl in here, an' about fifteen minutes ago this skunk come in. He saw my badge an' got all set to kill me. Then you come along. I was be-ginnin' to think you'd never have a chance to go for your gun."

"I reckon me tellin' him I was Jock Pete sort of knocked the wind outa him," Johnny said.

"It should have," Frame retorted. "Just before you came in, he did some braggin' an' told me who he was. He's Jock Pete!"

WAR BONDS FOR VICTORY

CAPTAIN SATAN

by Frank Bonham

"You'll travel to hell and back before you find a colder-hearted devil than Standage of San Felipe," Captain Satan heard his new command say. His smile was thin and terrible then—for he was the man they spoke about.

A Short Story of the Southwest

COLONEL JABEZ STOUT had been too long a border soldier to possess anything like tact. Moreover, he had had too many years as ranking officer of the Second Texas Dragoons to be greatly concerned about tolerance. But his affability, as he faced Standage in the lamplit office, might have deceived a man who had not been at sword-points with him a dozen times in this same room.

"A pity to disturb you at this unholy hour," he said. "I thought it best, however, that you hear Corporal Reagan's report. Afterward I shall be glad to have your suggestions. Out here, Mr. Standage, we blunder along so."

Stout's ramshorn mustaches and peppery hair were still sleep-rumpled. His dark-blue trousers were, as always, out of press, his black Jefferson boots badly stirrup-marked, and a gray undershirt with elbow-length sleeves was the only covering for his bone-rack chest.

Captain Standage said nothing. He had a close grain that the colonel's finest shafts failed to penetrate. But neither he nor the corporal missed the irony of the situation.

Corporal Reagan paused to eject tobacco juice onto the hearth. He was a crusty regular who had been in Standage's command at San Felipe, a Roman-nosed knout of a man with insolent brown eyes and red sideburns.

"Well, sir," he said, feeling his importance a little. "I cut sign on a parcel of horses and wagons south of Parras. There was no bottom to the mud down there—hadn't stopped raining in two weeks—and those wagons were traveling heavy. I judged from the number of horses that

they were traveling with a big escort.

"That meant a supply train—powder and ball for Cholo's guerrillas along the Bend. The wagons went north as far as Rio Amargo. Piedras Ford was also out, there, and the river was lapping her banks. There was nothing for them to do but hole up and wait for the water to go down. I found them camped outside Villalobos, twenty miles west. I figure they won't be able to make the crossing for three days yet."

Reagan's slate-blue jacket was unbuttoned and he tucked his hands in the hip pockets of his mud-spattered trousers. He let a pause gather, his eyes finding those of Captain Standage.

"I got close enough to see their guidon," he said. "It was yellow and green, with some kind of red doo-dad in the middle of it."

"The Maguey!" Colonel Stout remarked. "Hidalgo's Lancers, Mr. Standage. Apparently they mean that supply train to get through."

Standage had expected a surprise of some kind—the setting bristled with props. But at the mention of the name, Hidalgo, his stomach muscles tightened. He stood very still, a lean, dark-blue figure sketched against the whitewashed adobe wall. He had crossed Hidalgo's path before—but that was in '36, in San Felipe, before the Mexican dubbed himself a general and built an army equal to anything along the border in the bloody struggle between Mexico and the States for possession of Texas.

Reagan was watching him. Reagan had a stiff knee and a lance wound in the shoulder which dated back to San Felipe, and he had a fistful of grievances born



"Charge!" the Captain bellowed, saber gleaming in the sun,

in the same hour in the bloody battle.

Standage was conscious of the colonel's gaze. He had his foot on a chair seat, elbow on knee, chin against fist. One eye was closed and the other, squinted, gleamed like polished bluestone. The silence deepened. It was Stout who said at last:

"Well, Mr. Standage—?"

"Well, Colonel?" Standage crossed his arms.

"I asked for your suggestions," the colonel said. Rancor was coming out on him like the hackles lifting on the neck of a pitt bull.

"I prefer that the colonel plan his own campaign."

Stout straightened, the blood coming into his face. He was finding Standage a poor butt for his joke.

"Very well, Mr. Standage. It should be plain even to an infantryman what should be done. We must strike Hidalgo with every man and horse we can spare before he can cross Rio Amargo. If he makes rendezvous with Cholo, it means the end of our northern supply line for months. But, unfortunately, you have made such a move impossible."

"I, Colonel?"

Stout was suddenly barking, his temper running free. "With your everlasting drill, and inspections, and patrols! With the hour crying for action, you bring your men in from a four-day reconnaissance patrol, worn to nubbins and unfit for combat!"

Standage said sharply: "My men will be ready to take the field in an hour."

The colonel flung the chair aside. "You are not only a brass-and-fluff parade ground soldier, but a fool as well! To save your own face you would send those men out to be butchered!" He took a snorting breath through his nose. "You have not changed, I perceive, in ten years. You are still Standage, of San Felipe."

Reagan was watching the infantry officer with the greedy enjoyment of a belated pleasure in his face. But the coldness was gone from Standage's manner, and his words were short.

"I do not see where I am required to save face. I have given the men what they needed—hard work to make hard men. I took them over softer than recruits. In two months I have made sea-

soned soldiers out of every one of them."

"There is a difference between seasoned soldiers and mutinous, exhausted ones." Pride came into Stout's voice. "I have campaigned on the border for ten years, and in that time I have not put my dragoons through an hour's drill. Off-duty, they are scoundrels and hoodlums. They drink and they brawl and they chase the girls. General Taylor called them 'The Magnificent Drunkards.' But we win battles! That is all I ask of any soldier."

He yanked a heavy shirt from a wall peg and commenced shrugging into it. "Since Russell's death—God rest his soul!—you have turned what was a crack battalion of 'Rifles into the bedraggled carcass of an outfit. You may call them seasoned troopers, Captain. I call them armed coolies."

"That point can best be settled on the battlefield," the captain said coldly.

Stout ceased buttoning the shirt. "That was my own thought," he said. "You will turn your men out at dawn, Mr. Standage. Draw rations for six days and issue full combat equipment. We will see how many of your foot-soldiers are on hand to watch the Second Texas flush Hidalgo out of his rat's hole."

Standage would have left then, but the colonel stopped him.

"I noticed a book on your desk while you were on patrol. Something about the logistics of modern warfare. If you can balance that volume on your saddlehorn as you lead a charge, Mr. Standage, I shall recommend that you be decorated—for distinguished juggling while under fire."

The bugler sniggered.

CAPTAIN STANDAGE went past the sutler's store and up the wide alley between the low adobe barracks and the shambling buildings of Laundry Row. The black wing of night was still over the garrison, but dawn was not far off. He could hear the men snoring as he walked, the vigorous snoring of men who have earned their sleep. They would grumble when Corporal Reagan's bugle roused them, but after the kinks were out they would be ready for a march and a fight.

They had been rotten with liquor and

idleness when he had assumed command. Standage had taken their whiskey from them and given them drill. Walking along the alley, close to the wall, he knew they hated him for many things. For forced marches and short rations. For stormy bivouacs and long nights of sentry duty. For making soldiers out of them.

He felt their hatred when he rode at the head of the column down heat-choked arroyos. It was in their faces at retreat, when they stood woodenly at parade rest in the short, dark jackets and sky-blue trousers of the Fourth 'Rifles, that had not been brushed or washed for months before he arrived.

Martinet. . . . He wanted his men to fight like devils and behave like gentlemen.

Yet he knew he could have bought the respect and friendship of the men under him years ago, had he been willing to trade for these things his own dearly-bought convictions. But he had set his star by those beliefs too long, had paid too much in the learning of them.

Once he had overheard Sergeant Major Ramsay telling the story to a gang of recruits.

"I'll tell yez the trouble with Mr. Standage, my lads, and it'll be costing the lives of some of us one day: He sets more store by a campaign ribbon than he does the lives of his men! Reagan learned that at San Felipe. It was his bugle sounded the charge that threw a platoon of our rifles against two troops of Mexican lancers.

"What happened? What could happen! He was trying to save a handful of cannoneers the greasers'd cut off, but he lost most of his own command instead. Here's a promise, lads—you'll travel to hell and back before you find a colder-hearted devil than Standage, of San Felipe!"

In the dusty-black dawn Standage sat his horse beside the colonel's at the main gate, feeling the lift of excitement as the sounds and odors of the combat detail swirled about him. H and J Troops, the colonel's pride, centered by with sabers and carbines clanking.

There was little precision to their movement, and the captain had a moment of warmth when his own detail marched by

at quick-time, musket barrels canted at the measured angle, boot-heels striking the ground in cadence. He felt a rich satisfaction, not that he had bent wills to his, but that he had sweated the indolence out of them and given them a hardness that would serve them in battle.

Stout said: "Take charge of your detail, Mr. Standage," and loped to the head of the column, stretching out down the long, curving road from the hill. As the train of supply wagons jolted through the gate, Standage took his place beside his men. Reagan swung in, whistling under his breath.

Neither B Troop's Lieutenant Pierce, nor D Troop's Lieutenant Barney had had much to say when he had announced what the patrol involved. But Mr. Barney, who was young and chunky and who possessed, besides some mulish ideas of his own, a pair of magnificent black sideburns that curved scimitar-like to the corners of his mouth, remarked:

"You think the men are capable of a forced march, sir?"

Standage said dryly: "I think they are soldiers, Lieutenant—not school boys."

IN THE growing light they strung out along a freshet-swollen arroyo that led them southwest, holding this course most of the morning. The sky, which had been cloudy for days, cleared off in the afternoon. Overhead the sun flamed with an ardor that brought the sweat soaking through the men's jackets. Standage had no anxiety for musket-sling sores. His Rifles had slogged through hotter days than this, if they had never resented a march more.

He felt the rancor of their glances every time his eye ran down the long column shoving doggedly across the broken wasteland. Yet with a certain smugness he noted that the Magnificent Drunkards were reaching for their flat wooden canteens more often than was healthy.

They left the sageland for an arroyo-riven waste that crumpled far ahead into a chaos of flinty mountains. Standage, discerning a piping of green along the foothills, said to Reagan:

"Rio Amargo, Corporal?"

The bugler nodded. He was riding with a knee kinked about the swell of the

saddle, bugle slung under his arm. "Piedras Ford is south of the saddle in the hills, yonder. Villalobos is eight hours' ride from the ford. But we'll do well to make camp along the river tonight."

Ahead, the colonel's bay gelding swung from the point of the column. Stout raised his hand, a lanky, high-shouldered figure erect on the saddle. The non-commissioned officers sent the command down the line like a volley of rifle shots: "Detail—halt!"

Standage loped ahead. Stout looked ill-tempered and hot. He had not ridden combat patrol in many months, and Standage guessed he was finding the saddle less pleasant than a chair on the gallery with a long drink in his hand. Sweat had soaked the stand-up collar of his blue frock-coat. Sweat was on his red bony features and in the frayed mustaches.

"Devilish poor progress we're making, Captain," he said shortly.

"The Colonel is setting the pace," Standage remarked, with a critical glance for the lathered, blown mounts of the Second Texas.

"Never mind the horses," Stout snapped. "They will not be the ones to break down. What concerns me is that we shall be making camp near the river without having scouted the bosque for ambuscaders."

"Then we should have started an hour earlier," Standage pointed out.

"A little late to think of that," said the Colonel, acidly. "I propose to take the mounted detail ahead and choose a campsite before sundown. You will continue on to Piedras Ford. Is that clear?"

Standage nodded. "Quite clear." What was not clear was how the horses would hold up at a canter when they were clearly bogging down under a walk.

THE SUN had plunged behind the sawtooth hills in a rosy spray of cirrus clouds when Standage led his weary Foot-rifles into the humid green bosque of Rio Amargo. The smoke of supper fires was a tang in his nostrils. They passed a sentry leaning against a cottonwood. By the sounds and the flash of the fires through the trees they located the troops in a large clearing, cross-hatched with rows of pup tents. Among the trees the horses, ridden half to death, were being tended.

Standage turned his troops over to Lieutenant Pierce, and, with Mr. Barney, sought the colonel. Stout was in front of his own tent under a tree, drinking noisily from a canteen. Observing the burned-out look of him, the captain knew this day had levied heavy tribute on his strength.

Stout lowered the canteen, mopping his dripping mustaches with his free hand. He saw the infantrymen, and the expression that surged into his face somehow startled the captain. His lips made a smile, but it had cruelty.

"Foul luck, gentlemen," he said. "It appears your march has accomplished nothing more than to wear worn boots thinner. Have you inspected the ford?"

"You mean—they have already crossed?" Barney asked, startled.

"That," said the colonel, "is exactly what I do not mean. I am saying that the ford is still flooded. That the wagon-loads of supplies you must carry to be of any use to me whatever cannot be forded across for days!"

Standage looked at him. Without a word he set off toward the river. Stout and Barney, following, found him standing on the crumbling bank, watching the muddy current carry away, clod by clod, what had been a jetty-like affair of logs and dirt.

Stout studied him but could not read his face, and presently he said: "My Dragoons shall do well to cross, let alone infantry and wagons."

"The colonel is right," said Lieutenant Barney, bitterly. "This was an undertaking for dragoons or *voltigeurs*, from the start."

Standage spoke sharply. "Never lose faith in your weapons, Lieutenant. When you do that you cease to be a soldier. We will cross in the morning."

"But, sir—!"

"We will lash logs to a dozen wagons and construct a pontoon bridge," Standage said. "As for supplies, we will drop the blanket rolls and carry emergency rations and all the powder and ball each man can carry. Combat packs, Mr. Barney. Have them made up tonight."

Stout made a choking sound in his throat. "Hell and damnation! You can't fight a battle on the amount of ammunition

each man can carry. You'll not have enough for an assault nor a siege."

"Then," said the captain, smiling, "we shall have to thin our powder with sweat, shall we not? And if we run out of powder, we will use steel!"

Stout's gray head moved from side to side. His voice was angry and yet it held something of awe. "Mr. Standage, I should not care to lay my head on your pillow tomorrow night," he said.

"A man lives by his lights, sir," Standage said softly. "If mine fail me I shall not need a pillow tomorrow night."

The crossing was made in the first golden flush of dawn. Beyond the bosque the freight trail left the lush bottomlands, ascending the mountains through a wilderness of giant and dwarf pine. For five hours the patrol struggled through forbidding mountain passes.

At length the trail brought them to the mouth of a pass overlooking a broad plateau. Here Reagan announced: "If you sniff hard, Captain, you can smell 'em. Villalobos lies just across the plateau."

Standage passed the word to Stout. Beside a great slab-like boulder the officer dismounted and followed the bugler's directing finger.

"With your glasses you can see them camped in the trees at this end of town. Must be twelve hundred of them—infantry, artillery, lancers."

It was Mr. Barney who growled. "Correction, bugler. They *were* camped at this end of town. There's no sign of them now."

Stout snorted. "Then he's gone soft in the head since the border campaigns, for he's left his wagons behind. They're ringed up in the plaza."

Mr. Pierce, sounding relieved, chuckled. "Evidently he has no stomach for a brush with the Second Texas! Strange, though, that he made no effort to evacuate the wagons—"

Standard was frowning through the glasses, analyzing the approaches to the village: A brown-and-green patchwork of farms; a meandering stream spanned by a stone bridge; a belt of maguey and palo verde that merged gradually into the trees and box-like *jacales* of the town.

"Apparently," he remarked, "he also neglected to evacuate his artillery. You

will notice a number of redoubts on the far side of the barranca—"

There was the stiff silence of surprised men taking a second, closer look. "Captain Standage is right," the colonel said. "We shall not be cheated out of our fight. Mr. Standage, Mr. Culley—have the men drop their packs and all excess equipment. We will advance in combat formation."

As he mounted his horse he gave Standage a cold smile. "You will not need the supplies you left behind, Captain. Tonight your 'Rifles dine in Villalobos—as guests of the Second Texas!"

EXCITEMENT ended the grumbling of the troops. Bayonets flashed in the sun as they were fixed to the muzzles of the long rifles. Stout led the descent from the pass. At the bottom the dragoons moved out in double file. The sun was at zenith, its rays running like quicksilver down the raised sabers, shining greenly on the cornfields ahead.

As they passed the first scattered huts, movement could be discerned in the trees across the barranca. Stout saw this, and he came up straight with his nostrils distended, like an old war-horse scenting a fight.

From one of the redoubts there was a flash and a black roll of smoke. The ball landed in a cornfield, cutting a crazy swath as it came bounding toward them. With the roar of the first shot still on the air, the remainder of the dozen-old field pieces opened up.

"As skirmishers!" Standage snapped the command and Reagan's bugle came smartly to his lips.

Stout was close enough to bring the flat of his hand against the bell of the bugle. "I will give the orders, Mr. Standage!"

"Am I to let my men be cut to pieces?" Standage demanded.

Colonel Stout brought his saber from the scabbard with a flourish. His smile had a bristling ferocity.

"Your men will not come within range until those pieces have been silenced. You are about to see a practical demonstration of the superiority of the dragoon over the foot-soldier."

He wheeled his horse. Solid shot and fused were raining down, filling the air with shrapnel and dust. "Mr. Culley!"

Stout called. "Prepare to storm the redoubts left of the bridge. I will take H Troop against those on the right. You, Mr. Standage, will hold your command in readiness to charge after we have taken their cannon and engaged the lancers."

His voice strengthened, going like a bugle-note through the troops. "Prepare to charge!"

The dragoons went with a drumroll of hoofs and the cheers of the infantry to speed them. But Standage's face, as he rode to the point of the column and directed the formation of his skirmish line, was stony.

Under the belching mouths of the cannon, the dragoons crossed the stone bridge and swarmed through the first line of redoubts. From the trees a volley of musket-fire rippled, cutting a dozen men from the saddle. Standage watched the red guidon of the Second Texas sweep on, through smoke and dust. He saw the Texans' sabers flash and heard their cries as they took the rocky fortifications.

A moment later the guidon fluttered on a rise beyond the second line of artillery, and he knew the Magnificent Drunkards had made good Stout's boast. Luck, the guiding angel of foolhardy soldiers, had taken them farther than Standage had dreamed they could go.

Feeling the savage spirit that surged up in the men, Standage raised his saber high.

Cannon-sound, throaty and startling, arrested him. Without understanding, he watched the fluttering guidon go down, saw sections of the line collapse like ninepins on a skittling field. Chaos attacked the dragoons; in confusion they began to mill.

Mr. Barney shouted: "My God, sir! They've another line of cannon in the trees!"

STANDAGE'S ARM let the saber descend. A treble chorus of musketry mounted over the kettle-drumming of the artillery as the enemy infantry came swarming out of the trees. The Americans were suddenly falling back, the officers screaming orders, the men valiantly trying to pull the ravelled fabric of their line together.

And now, with the stage set for slaughter, the Mexican lancers swept out,

a yelling circus of shining lances and multi-colored haberdashery—red, green and yellow uniforms pointed up by gleaming brass. At their head rode a huge-bellied man on a white stallion, a brown giant festooned with gold braid.

Upon Standage's senses the scene laid a clammy sense of familiarity: The little coffee-colored horsemen with their lances levelled across the ponies' heads; the screaming rabble of infantry swarming along behind. But the cries he heard were from the lips of men dead ten years, and the panic rising in him had been born on another field than this.

Against the Mexicans' steel-tipped lances, the dragoons' sabers were flimsy toys. Revolvers came out of bearskin holsters and crackled briefly; then the moment cried for retreat or massacre. They clattered back across the bridge, a ragged ghost of the force that had gone out so gloriously.

They had put a precarious hundred feet between themselves and the Mexicans when they regained their own lines and swept around the flank. Lieutenant Pierce came up, white to the lobes of his ears.

"Sir! Are we going to let them be slaughtered? A charge, perhaps—"

"A heroic thought, Lieutenant," said Standage, "but not tactically sound. Corporal Reagan will tell you. Sound fire-at-will, bugler."

The double-note of the bugle loosed a staccato roll of musket-fire that stopped the lancers like a stone wall. A score of horses fell, kicking. The giant Hidalgo wheeled his horse and shouted a single word. The charge of the lancers veered and swung back out of range, leaving the field to the infantry.

Behind rocks and clumps of *cholla* the Mexicans dug in, pouring balled lead into the blue-gray line drawn across the field. With a jolt of alarm, Standage saw a dozen small brass field pieces being wheeled into position close behind them.

"Sound cease firing," he told Reagan.

Looking to the rear, he saw the Second Texas drawn up in ragged formation. The captain beckoned Lieutenant Barney, and as the first volley of cannon-fire crashed into the lines they loped back.

Stout met them in the shade of a palo verde. There was blood on his coat from

a lance-wound on the forearm. Sweat coursed his cheeks. He looked old and weary and his eyes were filled with despair.

"The fight goes against us, Mr. Standage," he said huskily. "Had I taken their artillery, Villalobos would be ours. I failed because I was too blind to count the odds." He hesitated a moment, striving against the last vestige of an old pride. Then he said: "The fight is yours. For what they are worth, the dragoons are yours to command."

All cockiness gone, Mr. Barney waited for Standage's reply. Standage thought: *Ten years I have waited for this moment and now it is here there is no satisfaction in it.* He realized that the only vindication he sought was of his methods as a soldier; not of himself as an officer of courage and judgment.

"Our hope lies in the strength of the men," he said. "I do not care how far we must retreat, so the battle goes according to plan. We must save our powder. If we can draw the lancers into a frontal attack, our fire-power will cut them to pieces. For the infantry, we will still have steel."

Stout frowned, pulling at his mustaches. "But if Hidalgo chooses to wear us down, man by man—?" And he looked beyond to where the Americans crouched behind every conceivable shelter, helpless under the bombardment of artillery and the snapping, small teeth of musketry.

"I am gambling," said Standage, "that my own dull infantry tactics will not appeal to him."

He returned to his men.

"For what they are worth." Standage knew the badly shocked troopers of the Second Texas would be only a liability from here on. Win or lose, the battle rested on the shoulders of the infantry.

He had hardly reached his post when the cannon fell silent. In the next moment the Mexican infantry rose at one impulse and came in a yelling horde across the field.

WHEN the little brown men were too close for a ball to miss its target, Standage let the Texans send their bullets crashing into them. Going to their knees they fired, primed, drew bead, each

flashing salvo hacking bloody gaps in the line. The tury went out of the assault. The attackers struggled forward another dozen yards and then fell back to the shelter of a shallow draw.

For the first time, Reagan's brown face showed excitement. Caught up by the savage battle-urge running like a flame through the troops, he fingered his bugle as though needing only the captain's confirmation before sounding the charge.

What Standage said was: "Sound the retreat." When Reagan stared, he repeated angrily: "Sound retreat, buglar! At this range we shall be cut to tatters, for we have not the powder to return their fire."

Lieutenant Barney, hearing the call, looked across the battlefield, and his lips formed one word: "Mad!"

Retreat was costly. There were wounded to carry, while the cannon pounded them mercilessly. They dug in again—sweating, cursing, rebellious men who fingered the triggers of their long rifles hungrily.

And always Standage watched the Mexican general as he moved up and down behind his lines. When would he weary of his game of fox and hounds and hurl his lancers in another bloody charge?

Twice, in the hours that followed, he sent his infantry forward in savage assaults. Twice the Americans arrested them. But always they were crowded back. Standage rode among his men, reading cruel exhaustion in their faces. The iron fortitude they had won in long months of training was deserting them.

Suddenly Lieutenant Barney came at a lope through the smoke and dirt. "They're bringing up their twelve-pounders, sir! The men can't stand much more of this."

Standage said: "I know." He spurred his pony over to a bearded sergeant kneeling beside a boulder. The man's forage cap was off and he had a bloodstained rag twisted about his head. "How many rounds have you left, Sergeant?" he asked.

The soldier let eight balls tumble from his bullet-pouch onto his hand. "Eight rounds, sir." Then his mouth made a crooked smile "And sixteen inches of steel when you call for it!"

Some of the tension in Standage relaxed. The effect of this, the first expres-

sion of faith in his leadership, was like the warmth of brandy in him.

"You will need both of them," he said to the man. "Steel for the infantry; balled lead for the lances!"

Glancing back, he saw the dragoons drawn up in attack formation, a bloody little band ready to die to redeem its name; but he thought: "Let them fill in where the loss is heaviest. I shall not be the one to send them against the lancers."

Abruptly, he snapped an order at Reagan. The corporal's jaw sagged when he heard it. "Did you say—'*Charge*,' sir?"

"If you prefer," Standage said, "I will sound the call myself. It is a great responsibility to blow such a call."

Reagan wiped the mouthpiece of the bugle with his sleeve, grinning. "It is the one call I could blow with a clear conscience, sir!"

The bugle-notes cut through the battle-sounds, a bright, clean blade. For a moment the troops, dulled by their losses, showed no reaction. Then they began to stir. Non-commissioned officers turned to confirm what they had heard. When they saw Standage erect in the stirrups, saber raised, a shout went up.

Standage breathed a prayer. "Lord, make them strong, as I have tried to make them!" And he brought the saber down.

WITH A CRY that seemed to hush even the cannon, the 'Rifles went out. Mr. Barney and Mr. Pierce, yelling, led their companies. Standage heard the impeccable Mr. Pierce shout: "Meat for your bayonets, men!" Mr. Barney's speech seemed to be a stream of profanity.

The sound of the assault went up to the sky. Muskets roared and bayonets clashed with the noise of giant scimitars being honed. Standage hacked right and left, knowing a hot satisfaction in the feel of bone and flesh under his blade. Fighting like madmen, the Texans strove to pry the enemy out of his stronghold. But there was a dogged savagery to the Mexicans' resistance. They held their ground stubbornly.

From the high ground behind the lines, the cannon poured their shrapnel point-blank into the attackers, tearing the line apart like rotten rags. Under the lash of desperation Standage spurred forward,

fighting to silence the murderous field-pieces. Behind him, a wedge of fighting men pressed ahead until a bristling wall of bayonets hurled them back.

For the first time, the crushing weight of hopelessness descended on the captain. He glanced along the battle-line and saw that with his men it was the same: Dog-tired, they were falling back.

Then a new sound roused him—a high whooping riding on the thunder of hoofs. Through the battle-haze he discerned a column of horsemen sweeping behind the Mexican line. From both sides they came—hard-riding cavalymen under the red guidon of the Second Texas!

The 'Rifles saw and understood. They were not fighting alone. Stout had brought his ragged band out for another sortie, with death or victory the prize.

Again the lancers came out, fresh, burning for action. But this time they were forced to divide their strength to meet the two-pronged attack of the Americans. On the right, Stout threw his troopers against the Mexicans, riding the vanguard down with saber and pistol. Standage saw the blue-and-gold tide roll over the batteries of six- and twelve-pounders, saw the colonel and a crew of dragoons leap to the ground and hack their way through the cannoners.

A shout came from the throats of his men as they realized what was happening. The dragoons were turning the cannon on the Mexicans! Lancers and terrified infantry alike, they were swinging the smoking muzzles upon them.

The first shell sliced through the massed infantry like a scythe, cutting a gory lane before it exploded among the riflemen. Into the gap rushed a spearhead of Texans.

Blast of solid shot tore a hole in the left flank, giving a toe-hold for another pry-bar of bayonets.

Hidalgo was tasting the same gall he had poured down the throats of the dragoons. Sweating cavalymen, glutting the cannon with powder and shot, worked bloody slaughter among the horsemen. A host of Mexicans were already down. The rest showed growing signs of panic.

The Second Texas, from the colonel down to the scurviest private, was on the march. Their sabers sang with vengeance as they hacked the painted lances aside.

Standage heard their war-cries as he led his exultant forces deeper into the sagging line. There was no semblance of orderly retreat. At a dozen spots the Texans had broken through, doubling back to throw rings of steel about the Mexicans.

The guns were roaring incessantly. Against the screaming showers of razored shrapnel not even Hidalgo's reckless border wolves could stand. Knowing that, the Mexican rallied his lances for a final assault. But the war-gods were laughing even as he plunged forward. Stout's saber fell, and in the roar and flash of burning powder Hidalgo's last hope of victory was snuffed out. When the smoke cleared, there was no sign of the giant. But under the stampeding hoofs of the lancers' mounts could be seen flashes of the hide of the white stallion.

It was enough for the lancers. Lances stained with the blood of many a border soldier began to fall to the ground in token of surrender.

Stout wheeled to give aid to Captain Standage, but he saw immediately that the infantryman needed no help. Over the Mexican lines fluttered his own blue guidon. Hidalgo's infantry, too, had had enough.

COLONEL STOUT did not forget his promise of that morning: "Supper in Villalobos—I!"

In a smoky tavern off the plaza, the officers dined hugely on barbecued beef and red Mexican wine. Through the windows came the clamor of roistering troopers, eating and drinking under the chinaberry trees.

Standage was conscious of the glances of Mr. Barney and Mr. Pierce. The smugness they had brought with them from officers' school had been washed out in the bright blood of battle. Their eyes were respectful and a little awed.

Colonel Stout leaned across the table to

refill the captain's glass. "I shall be borrowing your text-books one day soon," he said casually. "It occurs to me that we might work out some tactical problems now and then to the benefit of us both."

"No text-book in my library could have shown you how to lead your men back from hell today," he said.

"If I had studied your texts," the colonel told him, "I should not have led my men to hell in the first place."

He stood up, his glass raised. "A toast, gentlemen—not to the man who showed us how to thin our powder with blood and sweat, for every private in Villalobos has toasted him tonight. I give you General Hidalgo—for teaching an old fool more humility than he had learned in fifty years!"

Reagan was waiting in the shadows when Standage left to spread his blankets under the trees. "I have a favor to ask, sir," the corporal said, with some uncertainty.

Standage waited while he hesitated over his words. Reagan was holding his bugle by the sling. He raised it now and said:

"This bugle, sir—it isn't really mine, you know. It's Quartermaster property. I was thinking that if you would report it as lost in battle, I'd be mighty grateful."

"You want it as a souvenir?"

"That's it. The barracks is a great place for talk. Many a yarn I'll be spinning for the recruits about today's bloody business. I was thinking that if I had it for proof, the men would be slower to call me a liar."

"Is it," Standage asked quietly, "the same bugle that blew the charge for Standage, of San Felipe?"

Reagan slung the bugle over his shoulder. "That yarn I have forgotten, sir. But it will be a proud day when I sit on my bunk a-polishing it, and say to the lads: 'This is the bugle that blew the charge for Standage, of Villalobos!'"

BUY WAR BONDS



THE CURSE OF MONTEZUMA

By Les Savage, Jr.

*Wave the parrot plumes again
The gauchupin now burns
Quetzalcoatl comes to reign
The Serpent-God returns.*

THE THREE men sat hunched over in their saddles with backs to the wind that mourned down off the ridge like the plaint of a lost soul, flutter-

ing the brim of Elder Fayette's hat against its crown with a constant, slapping sound.

"Can't you turn that hat around or something?" said Orville Beamont nervously. "Get's on a man's nerves."

Fayette's hard mouth curled at one corner, contemptuously, and he didn't answer, and the hatbrim kept on flapping.

"When's he coming, anyway," muttered

Death rode the night winds of the Santiagos, for an ancient curse had risen to blight the land. Only *Señorita Scorpion* could halt that murder tide, and she was helpless—for fighting her was the man she loved.

Beamont angrily. "He promised he'd be here before night."

"Don't say it like that," said Abilene, trying to light a cigarette for the third time. "He ain't a devil or something. He's human, just like you or me."

The wind rose to an unearthly shriek, whipping Fayette's hatbrim into a mad tattoo for a moment, and then died to a soft whine again. Beamont suddenly stiffened. Fayette's mare whinneyed and tried to bolt, and he caught it with a savage jerk on the reins.

"*Buenas noches, señores,*" said the man who had appeared so silently from the black jack timber above them. "Have you been waiting long?"

Orville Beamont let out a gusty breath. "You! I thought it was him. Isn't he with you?"

The man was on foot, wearing a dark blue hooded cloak the Mexicans called a *capuz*. His shiny mitaja leggings gleamed dully as he came on down toward the three horsebackers, something serpentine in the lithe, sinuous movements of his slim body. He had a narrow, vulpine face beneath the hood of his cloak, and the slender, pale hands of a conspirator, and he kept rubbing his long forefinger against his thumb in an oily, habitual way, like a usurer who saw the promise of another gold piece.

"No, he is not with me," said the man. "We were all to arrive separately, if you recall. *Pues*, you have not prepared for him. A fire, *hombres*, a fire. After all, it is not every day you meet the reincarnation of Montezuma, returned to free his people from their servitude."

Fayette snorted. "Keep that tripe in your own duffle bag, Ortega. We didn't want to show any light with a fire."

"You are farther into the Guadalupe than any white man has ever been, *señores*, and there is no possible danger of anyone seeing you," said Luis Ortega urbanely, and turned to Abilene. "If you would be so kind as to get some wood?"

ABILENE looked at Fayette. Fayette shrugged, then edged his mare over

to an outcropping of rocks and dismounted, kicking away the matted undergrowth until he had hollowed out a place for a fire. The dark-faced Ortego laughed softly and ran his slender hands up and down the gold hilted cane he carried, looking up the canyon toward the sombrous peak, El Capitan.

Abilene came back with his dally rope hitched around his saddle horn, dragging a dead cottonwood log. It was rotten enough to split with a Bowie he took from his saddle roll. They banked kindling against the rock, out of the wind. The light flared under Abilene's match, catching redly across the impatient line to Elder Fayette's hard mouth. Beamont had been standing nervously by his horse. He jerked around suddenly.

"Whassat?"

The Indians had appeared without sound. They stood like silent ghosts, just outside the circle of firelight.

"All right, all right," said Fayette. "Come on in."

"*Señor Fayette,*" hissed Luis Ortega, "you do not speak to the Lord Montezuma in that fashion. I warned you—" he turned to the pair of Indians, and Fayette thought a mocking note had entered his suave voice.



"We thank Quetzalcoatl for your safety, Tlatoani Montezuma. Please accept our humble companionship and join us."

Fayette's eyes narrowed, studying the Indian who stepped into the light. He was a huge man, well over six feet tall in his rawhide huiraches, his tremendous shoulders and great broad chest swelling a mantle which hung below his knees. At first Fayette thought the cloak was of varicolored cloth; then he realized it was feathers, feathers of a dozen different hues, catching the firelight in a bizarre pattern. The second inscrutable Indian spread out a gold cloth, and Montezuma seated himself cross-legged without a word. He held his great head up, the haughty beak of his nose throwing a deep shadow over the curl of his arrogant mouth.

Luis Ortega picked up a handful of earth, kissed it, threw it into the flames. "Xiuchtecuitli, the Fire God. May he consume the gauchupin."

Beamont's thin head jerked toward him. "Guachupin?"

"The gauchupines are descendants of the upper class Spaniards who have been ruling Mexico since Cortez conquered the Aztecs," smiled Ortega softly. "The gauchupines are the tyrants who will be annihilated in the all-consuming fire of Xiuchtecuitli, now that our Lord Montezuma has returned."

"All right," said Fayette. "All right. How about the business? Does he speak English?"

Montezuma had been sitting silently, heavy-lidded eyes staring blankly into the fire, as if he were lost in reverie. His voice startled Elder Fayette, deep and hollow.

"I speak all languages. I am a Tlatoani. I am a supreme ruler. I am Montezuma."

Standing out in the darkness by the horses, Abilene spat. Fayette glanced his way a moment. He couldn't see him very well, but he knew how the supple hands would be hitched into the cartridge belt of that Beale-Remington Abilene wore. Orville Beamont spoke in his nervous, spiteful way.

"We didn't come here to discuss Aztec mythology. Let's get down to business."

Ortega turned toward him. "Señor—"

Montezuma stopped Ortega with a wave of his bronze hand, looking at Beamont. The Indian's eyes seemed focussed for

the first time. They held a strange glittering intensity. Beamont flushed angrily. He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth in a jerky gesture, eyes shifting before Montezuma's black glare.

"You do not believe Montezuma has returned?" said the Indian.

"I didn't say that—"

"You do not believe Montezuma has returned." It was a statement this time, and it held something final. "You are an unbeliever."

"Señores," said Ortega swiftly. "We did not come here to quarrel. It would be wise of you, Señor Beamont, to watch what you say. Tlatoani Montezuma, forgive the Americanos. They are ignorant."

"Their ignorance is no excuse."

"Look," said Fayette. "Let's scrape the fur off and get down to the hide. You're going to do a job for us and we're going to pay you. That's simple enough. You want to hear what the job is or shall we call it a sour deal?"

ORTEGA'S words slipped from his flannel-mouth, as sly and furtive as his eyes, and he rubbed his forefinger against his thumb in that way. "Pues, of course you shall not call it a sour deal. Who else could do the job? You have tried, and failed. *Por supuesto*, if you will use a certain amount of tact, we shall come to an amicable agreement." He turned obsequiously to Montezuma. "It is this, my lord. For a long time now, Señores Fayette and Beamont, and certain of their constituents, have had ah, shall we say, ambitions concerning the Big Bend. Unfortunately, there are those in Brewster County, who do not sympathize with these ambitions. Elgera Douglas, for one, the heiress to the Santiago Mine. Chisos Owens, who is the friend of every peon this side of the Rio."

"Peons," spat Orville Beamont. "That's just it. A whole bunch of small time peon rancheros holding little spreads and controlling all the water. What chance has a big operator?"

"You're cattle don't seem to be dying," said Ortega slyly.

Beamont jerked his hand in a nervous gesture. "That's not the idea. Fayette and I haven't got enough cattle now to put in your left saddle bag. And it won't do

us any good to get more if we don't have the water for them."

"Ah, yes," Ortega's voice was insinuating. "You wish to expand. What a laudable ambition."

Fayette squatted there without speaking, letting Beamont go on, watching him with a faint contempt in the curl of his lip. Perhaps Orville Beamont sensed the sly mockery in Ortega's voice. He rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth, speaking jerkily.

"Yeah, yeah. We've tried to put through legislation for a fair division of the water. But the Douglas girl and Chisos Owens have Brewster County sewed up. Sheriff Hagar's their man. Alpine's the county seat, and whatever legal measures we've tried to take there, Hagar's stopped."

Montezuma looked up. "Legal measures?"

Beamont wiped his mouth. "Yeah, uh, the legal measures we—"

"I don't think you know what legal measures are, *Señor* Beamont," said Montezuma. "Are you a hypocrite as well as a thief?"

Beamont's voice was shrill. "Listen—"

"Why not speak the truth?" said Montezuma, staring blankly back into the fire. "Alpine is the county seat for Brewster; it is the shipping center for all the Big Bend. A lucrative plum for any political machine that could break the hold which the Douglas-Owens faction has on the county. In a cattle-country, the man with the most cattle can invariably gain political control. And in a dry cattle-country, such as the Big Bend, the man who wants the most cattle must have the most water. As long as the Douglas-Owens faction is in power, the small rancheros will be protected, and the water rights will be equally divided so that no one man or group of men can get the upper hand."

Fayette's laugh was harsh. "How well you put it."

Montezuma didn't seem to hear him. "Whatever political measures you have tried were certainly not legal, *Señor* Beamont. And the other measures? Terrorism? You thought you could drive the rancheros away from their water with your raids. I understand Elgera Douglas can handle a gun. Was it she who put

a stop to that? But not before several small rancheros had been murdered, eh? Pablo Otero's two sons. Sheriff Johnny Hagar is still looking for their murderer. Wouldn't he be surprised to know you are the man he wants, Orville Beamont?"

Beamont jumped to his feet, watery eyes wide. "You're lying. How did you know? You're a lying sonofa—"

Montezuma's gaze swung to him, focusing suddenly in that strange glittering intensity. "I am a Tlatoani, *Señor* Beamont. A supreme ruler. I know all. You led those raids on the peons. It was your gun that killed Otero's two sons!"

"You're a liar," screamed Beamont. "You're no Tlatoani. You're just a dam greasy Indian lying in your filthy teeth—"

The gunshot deafened Fayette. He saw Beamont stiffen. He saw Beamont claw at his skinny chest. He saw Beamont fall over onto his face in the fire.

FOR a long moment, nobody moved. The mahogany color left Elder Fayette's heavy-boned face until it was dead white beneath his soft-brimmed hat.

He hadn't seen Montezuma draw the gun; he couldn't see it now. The Indian sat in that utter composure, his eyes looking into the flames without seeming to be focussed on anything. His hands lay on his knee, empty. The only man with a gun out was Abilene, standing back there in the darkness by the horses, the Beale-Remington gleaming fitfully in his hand. But he hadn't fired. Fayette had caught the movement of his draw an instant after the shot. Finally Fayette spoke between his teeth.

"Why did you have to do that?" he asked Montezuma.

Ortega took a sibilant breath. "The life of any man is Tlatoani Montezuma's sovereign right to take, or save."

The two Indians came from the darkness like wraiths. Fayette wasn't aware of them till they stood over the body, tall and stalwart in gilt-edged loin cloths and plumed bonnets, as like as two barrels of a scatter-gun. Without a word, they lifted Beamont and carried him out into the darkness.

"Now," said Ortega smoothly. "Shall we go on?"

Fayette looked toward him. Luis Ortega

smiled, shrugging his shoulders, and his words were oily.

"Come now, *Señor Fayette*, you cannot tell me Beamont's death bothers you so much. He was a contemptible *barrachon*, of small value to either you or us. I have no doubt you planned to eliminate him."

Fayette lowered himself to a squatting position again with a slow, deliberate control over his weight that was surprising in such a heavy man. He looked into Montezuma's blank eyes.

"Sort of up to date, isn't it, for the reincarnation of Montezuma to carry a hide-out?" he said thinly. "All right. All right. Just don't try it on me, *compadre*. You haven't got enough lead in that cutter to stop me before I'd kill you so dead you'd never reincarnate."

"*Señor—*" flashed Ortega.

"Shut up," said Fayette. "I'm talking to Montezuma. You claim you can get rid of Chisos Owens and *Señorita Scorpion*? All right. I don't think you can, but I'll give you a crack at it. Elgera Douglas's Santiago spread is down in the Dead Horse Mountains. The only way in or out of the Santiago Valley is through a mine shaft. Beamont tried to get in three times when he was raiding down there, and couldn't do it. I've paid to have the girl nailed on the outside, more than once, but she can handle a gun better than any man in Texas, and she's a wildcat, and she still wears her boots sticking straight up."

"You have the payment?" said Montezuma.

"You'll get your payment," said Fayette, "when you prove you can do the job."

"Getting rid of the girl and Chisos will pave the way to your control of the Big Bend," said Montezuma. "But you'll not be through fighting when they're dead. Johnny Hagar is as dangerous as either of them. This Chisos Owens, is he really as strong a man as you claim?"

Fayette nodded his head toward the lean, silent man standing out by the horses. "Abilene's been with me a long time. I never thought I'd see the man he couldn't take care of. He couldn't take care of Chisos Owens."

Montezuma stared into the fire. "I have been hunting a man such as that for a long time; I shall need him in the days to come. It would be a crime to waste him by kill-

ing him. Why not turn his strength into our strength?"

"I'd give anything to have Chisos Owens riding in my wagon," said Fayette. "But you can't buy him."

"I did not mean that," said Montezuma, and his voice held a brooding portent, and he was looking into some infinity beyond the fire, his eyes blank and glazed. "There are other ways, *Señor Fayette*, other ways.

Surprise crossed the harsh planes of Elder Fayette's face for the first time. "What do you mean?"

Montezuma began to speak.



Montezuma

II

As Mictlantecutl in Hades rules

So I will rule above

And turn strong men to traitor-fools

Who betray the ones they love.

THE NORTHER that had been building for a week now, swept into the Santiago Valley with all its fury, howling dismally outside the sprawling adobe ranch house, bending the willows in the small placita behind the building until they brushed against the earthen roof-top with a mournful, scraping insistence, as if seeking the safety inside. Elgera Douglas sat in the huge oak arm chair by the roaring fire at one end of the long parlor. Her blonde hair fell shimmering and unruly

about the curve of her cheek, flushed from the heat of the blaze. There was something wild in the arch of her eye-brow, a temptuousness in the piquant curve of her pouting lower lip. She sprawled in the chair like a boy, the length of her slim legs accentuated by the tight-fitting charro trousers, gaudy with red roses sewn down their seams.

She stiffened suddenly as the man entered the room from the hallway, her blue eyes flashing in a startled way, like a doe surprised at the pool.

"Were you thinking, *Señorita* Scorpion?" said Lobos Delcazar, his white teeth gleaming in a grin. "About Chisos Owens, perhaps?"

She tossed her head. "Never mind. Have you looked at the guards at the mine?"

"Not yet," said Lobos. "But you have nothing to worry about. Nobody can get into this valley. Two men in that mine could hold off an army."

Since the mysterious raids had been sweeping the Big Bend, and Pablo Otero's two sons had been murdered, Elgera had hired extra men to guard her spread. Lobos Delcazar had been recommended by Johnny Hagar, and deputized for the job. He was the cousin of Ramon Delcazar, who was Chisos Owens' best friend. He was a big swaggering man, Lobos, wearing a Mexican dragoon's coat with red cuffs and collar over his white silk shirt. To show off a waist as slim as a girl's he wore a broad red sash, tied on the right side and hanging down his legs so that fringed edge touched the top of his polished Blucher boots. There was something ceremonious in the way he slipped a reddish bean from his pocket, passing it to his mouth.

"What are you eating all the time, Lobos?" asked Elgera. "Frijoles?"

Lobos laughed, brushing his finger across his mustache affectedly. "No, *señorita*, not beans. Peyote."

"*Raíz diabólica?*"

"Ah, *señorita*, some may call it the devil weed," he said, and his red sash twitched as he moved toward her. "But in truth, it is a boon to mankind. It makes life a gorgeous dream." He bowed low to her. "Many of the Mexicans use it. Perhaps you would let me inculcate you into its sacred mysteries."

He was almost leering, and she caught

the slight dilation of his black pupils, and then the faint glaze that passed across his eyes following the dilation. She had seen it before, and somehow it made her feel that beneath all his affected ostentation, Lobos Delcazar was not quite so colorful or gallant as he seemed or so harmless.

"You'd better go out and see about changing the guards," she said, and rose from the chair.

He pressed a brown hand to his heart, and she thought his voice sounded mocking. "You would send me away so soon, *carrisima*? All the *hombres* in Alpine talk about the wild girl of the Santiago, and now, when I finally see her, she sends me out into the storm."

Señorita Scorpion hitched her gun around. "Lobos."

He straightened slowly, and took a step backward. His eyes were on the gun, and his grin was suddenly forced. It was a big Army Model Colt, with black rubber grips, and it hung against her slim thigh heavily.

"*Perdonme*," he said. "I did not realize it was that way. Would you really use that gun on me like they say, *señorita*?"

"What do you think?"

He had recovered his composure, and he brushed his mustache with a finger, grinning broadly. "*Dios*, I think you would. *Si*. I think you would. I'm going, *señorita*, I'm going right now. I hope you will forgive me. I am an impetuous fool. *Adios*, *señorita*. It breaks my heart. *Adios* . . ."

Laughing, he turned and swaggered to the door. The fire was almost swept out by the gale as he opened the portal; he had to turn and lean his weight against it to close it.

ELGERA turned back to the chair angrily. Yet, as she sank back into it, she couldn't help comparing Lobos with Chisos Owens. Lobos was the kind of man who should appeal to her, really, the handsome swagger, the dash, the wildness. But somehow, it was always Chisos, big and slow and stubborn, patiently waiting for her. The blue of her eyes deepened, staring into the fire. If she could only be sure how she felt for Chisos. She knew she loved him, yet there was something wild and tameless in her that rebelled at the thought of settling down.

She was still sitting there when the wind once more almost extinguished the fire. Elgera turned in the chair to see her brother bursting into the room. He was tall and lanky, Natividad Douglas, with jet black hair and blue eyes, long legs bowed slightly in greasy chivarras. He ran to the chair without shutting the door behind him, grabbing Elgera by the arm.

"You've got to get out," he shouted above the screaming norther. "Something's gone wrong. They've gotten through."

She was out of the chair, jerking loose from him. "Who's gotten through?"

"I don't know, he yelled. "I was coming from the bunkhouse down by the river and saw them riding out of the mine. . . ."

Above the wind, she heard the first faint shots, then the dull tattoo of hoofbeats. Someone yelled from far away, the sound warped by the storm. Elgera pushed by Natividad, breaking into a run for the hall door.

"Not that way," he called. "You'll be caught—"

She ran down the hall to the right wing of the house, boots pounding the hard, packed earthen floor. The wind struck her like a wall when she tore open the rear door, driving her against the outside of the house. She bent almost double, long hair streaming behind her as she struggled away from the building. The slope rose behind the hacienda into the *Sierra del Caballo Muerto*—the desolate Mountains of the Dead Horse, lifting their jagged red peaks up to surround the Santiago completely. The only way in or out of the valley was through the shaft of the ancient Santiago Mine, which opened out above the house. Elgera could hear the shouts and gunfire more clearly now. A ridden horse passed her far to the right, racing down the hill toward the river below. Other riders clattered by on her other side, missing her in the darkness.

Two of them hauled up on sliding haunches by the corrals above, and one man jumped off his mount to unlash the let-down bars. Elgera ran toward them, drawing her Army. The one still mounted caught sight of her. He wore some sort of long cloak that whipped about him as he whirled in his saddle to fire.

She began shooting now. The one on

foot turned from the bars, trying to get a rifle from the boot on his rig. Elgera's second shot caught him, and he fell back against the cottonwood post. His horse bolted, spooked by the gun-fire. The man mounted had to stop shooting and fight his own frenzied horse, wheeling and plunging it on up the hill, trying to turn it back.

The slope shook as more horsemen passed Elgera farther out whooping savagely, going on down toward the bottom of the valley. A red light flared up behind her. They had set fire to the house.

She reached the corral before the man above had gotten his horse turned around. She ran past the one sagging against the bars, thinking her shot had finished him. She was tearing at the drop bars when he threw himself on her from behind.

"Miquiztli!" he screamed, and she caught the flash of his huge knife coming down on her.

ELGERA whirled, throwing up her gun. The blade clanged off the Colt's barrel. The gun dropped from her stunned fingers, and the man's sweaty fetid weight was against her, carrying her back against the corral. His face was twisted insanely above her, streaked with ochre and vermilion, black teeth showing beneath lips peeled back in a snarl. Gasping with the pain it must have caused him, he struck at her again. She jerked to one side beneath him. The cottonwood bar shuddered as the huge knife struck it by her shoulder.

Elgera threw herself forward, grabbing the man about his legs. They rolled into the gramma grass. The girl fought savagely, clawing, biting, kicking. She came on top of him and rammed a vicious knee into his stomach. He choked and doubled up, trying to jab upward with the big knife. But it was too long a weapon for close work, and she caught his wrist.

"Miquiztli!" he bawled again, jerking away from beneath her.

She was thrown off-balance. He rolled over on her. She held his wrist in a desperate grip. He tried to jerk the knife from between them before his full weight descended on her. But he didn't quite make it, and he came down on her heavily, and his body stiffened suddenly. He sprawled out on her, his gasp hot in her

face. She struggled from beneath him, seeing that he had plunged the strange knife into his own body by rolling on it.

The wind caught at Elgera as she ran toward the corral again, scooping up her gun where she had dropped it, jamming fresh loads in. Other horsemen had spotted the corral, and a bunch of them were wheeling toward it. But Elgera knew she could do nothing on foot, and she ran in among the squealing kicking remuda of Circulo S horses, seeking her own palomino. There was no time to stop for saddle or reins. Reaching the big golden stallion, she ripped off her long bandanna and grabbed the horse's creamy forelock, jerking its head down to knot the handkerchief around its jaw in a hackamore.

The riders were wheeling outside and shooting into the corral. A big mare screamed and reared and went down beneath the other frenzied horses. Elgera jumped aboard her palomino, cutting around to the rear of the corral where it was clear. She pulled the animal around and began firing her gun into the air. The thunder of shots behind them drove the remuda forward out the gate; the press of their hurtling bodies smashed against a section of the fence nearest the opening, taking it with them. And riding their tails like an Indian was *Señorita* Scorpion.

She had one long leg hooked across the palomino's broad bare back, and was bent forward, lying along its left side as she pounded out. The riders had to break away from the point of the herd, and they were still milling around on either flank as the girl passed them. One wild-eyed horsebacker tried to follow her, gun stabbing the darkness. She turned and fired and saw his horse stumble and fall, pitching the rider over its head.

Elgera rode with the stampede into the junipers on the slope above the house, then cut down through the trees, skirting the burning building. The majority of the raiders had gone on down into the bottom of the Santiago where the Circulo S cattle were. Already a greater thunder than that of the stampeding horses was beginning to roll up to the girl.

She passed one of her own men, sprawled out where he had been caught running across the ford of the river, his

face and torso lying in the sandy bank, his feet sunk in the water.

She splashed to the other side and raced past the bunkhouse. It was a blazing holocaust, a few remaining timbers reaching up through the flames like blackened bones. A riderless horse passed her going the other way. Then she crossed the bed-ground of the cattle, and saw the tail of the stampede ahead. She couldn't understand why they were driving the herd northeast. The way out of the valley was to the west, behind her. The only thing ahead of her—

A strange, feral look crossed her face as she realized what did lie ahead of her. She bent forward on her horse, screaming at it in the wind. The stallion stretched out beneath her, lathered flanks heaving as is poured on the speed. A motte of poplars swept by in a shadowy pattern, and she broke into the open sacaguista flats beyond. Then she saw the first of the riders ahead. Some of her own men were still going, their guns spitting redly, now and then.

ELGERA passed another body sprawled on the ground, catching the impression of a paint-streaked face staring blankly upward. She fought her horse around the flank of the herd, bent low. The singular golden color of the animal was lost in the darkness and billowing dust, and the riders must have taken her for one of their own; she passed half a dozen of them and they didn't look twice. Then ahead, on the swing, she saw her brother riding a big black. He was firing across the sea of horns at a dim rider far to the front.

"Natividad," screamed the girl. "Get up to the point. They're stampeding them toward the cut. Can't you see? Get to the point and try to turn them. They'll go over the cliffs."

Natividad turned in his saddle, waving his gun. They were charging up the steepening slope through crackling sagebrush, and it looked like one smooth incline forming a flank of the jagged range that towered ahead; but there was a big cut that ran transversely across the shoulder of the mountain, not a quarter mile in front of the herd, a cut deep enough to finish every animal running if they went into it.



Senorita Scorpion

Elgera's palomino passed Natividad's black, and she dropped over to hang on one side as she brought up with the next man. He glanced back at her, twisted around to fire. Over the humping withers of her palomino, she shot the rider from his saddle.

Four more horsebackers had been galloping farther out on the flank, and they quartered in through the dust as they saw their man go down. Elgera shifted her gun across the palomino's back, throwing down on the man leading the quartette.

Then she stopped her Colt there, with her thumb holding the hammer back, and her mouth opened in a soundless cry. The man across her sights wore a strange gaudy cloak that flapped away from shoulders like a range bull's. His sun-bleached eyebrows and stubble beard gleamed pale-blond against the face colored like old saddle leather from the sun. He was close enough by now for her to see the fiendish grin that drew his lips back against teeth stained black. There was something savagely eager about the way he raised his six-shooter to fire at her.

"No," she called helplessly. "No . . ."

The man's gun flamed again and again. She didn't know which bullet struck her shoulder. It was as if a giant hand had torn her from the palomino. Screaming

agony blotted out most of her consciousness when she hit. Through the awful pain, she was aware that she bounced and rolled, with the cattle thundering all about her, the ground shaking and rumbling beneath her.

Someone wheeled a horse above Elgera, jumping off. She felt hands lifting her up. She tried to aid as she was dragged out of the running animals. A pair of steers shook the ground in front of her. The man dragged her toward an uplift of sandstone. A big heifer charged by behind. Then she was laid gently down, sobbing and shaking with pain and reaction. It was her brother bending over her, breathing heavily, tearing her ripped, bloody shirt away from the bullet wound in her shoulder.

The sound of running cattle gradually died, and the dust settled softly back to earth, and it was ominously silent. In a little while, a cavalcade of horsemen passed them below, picking up the black horse Natividad had left behind, then going on back toward the burning house.

"Did you see who was leading them?" she said. "Did you see who shot me?"

Natividad shook his head. "No, Elgera, all I cared about was getting you out of there."

She put her face against her brother's chest and began to cry again, and it wasn't because of the pain, now, and her voice had a dull, hopeless sound.

"It was Chisos Owens," she said. "Chisos Owens."

III

*The Gods of Night are from Atzalan
The Senores del Noche are nine
Their sacred sword is the macapan
Their powers of darkness mine.*

THE NORTHER had blown itself out, leaving a sombrous pall of yellow dust above Alpine. The hitchracks of the county seat were full of horses, huddled together as if they sensed the strange foreboding that seemed to have settled over the town, their tails fluttering in the last vagrant gusts of biting wind that mourned across Second Street.

Elgera had gotten her wound tended by Doctor Farris; now she stood in the

sheriff's office down Second Street from Main, watching Johnny Hagar apprehensively.

It was said, in the Big Bend, that Sheriff Johnny Hagar would be grinning when he came face to face with the devil himself. He wasn't grinning now. He stood in front of the girl, turning the strange sword over and over in his hands. It was made of some tough wood, about three feet long, with sharpened pieces of obsidian attached to the flat blade for cutting edges.

A man walked past the open door, head bent into the wind. His boots made a hollow sound on the plank walk.

"Crazy knife, isn't it?" said Elgera nervously. "The Indian who attacked me at the corral used it. You know most of the tribes, Hagar. I thought maybe you could tell me where it comes from."

Johnny Hagar studied the knife silently. He was a well-proportioned man for his six-feet-four, broad shoulders filling out his flannel shirt, twin ivory-handled Peacemakers riding slim hips in an arrogant, reckless way. He kept his curly black hair cropped close, accentuating the youth of his clean-shaven jaw and straight, frank mouth. The only thing that might have indicated his true sophistication were his eyes. The faint wind-wrinkles at their corners gave them an older, worldly-wise look. Or perhaps that look emanated from the eyes themselves. He had been around.

"You were wiped out?" he said finally.

"I'd sunk most of my cash in the herds," she said, "and improvements on the spread. They ran every cow I owned off the cliff. Whatever else I had was burned in the house and outbuildings. My uncle and brother were guarding the mine. You know how the lay of that land is. They could have held it against all the cavalry from Fort Leaton. Only somebody coming in from behind could have gotten them, or someone they trusted enough to allow close in. I found them dead along with the other guard. Chisos Owens—"

She broke off, turning toward the window so Hagar wouldn't see the tears welling into her eyes. Yes, they would have trusted Chisos Owens with their very lives. It must have been pitifully simple for him. She shook her blonde head angrily, seeing that most of the huddled mounts at the hitchrack in front of this

office bore the Teacup brand. Across the street in front of the Alamo Saddlery, a little knot of dusty cowhands stood talking in low tones. On the corner of Main and Second, by the Alpine Lodge, were others.

"I see Fayette's in town with his whole army," she said. "Is that how we stand?"

"Our position isn't so good," said Hagar, "and he knows it. I think he's getting ready to push something. If it was just a matter of stacking my guns against Fayette, I wouldn't worry. But you know it's never been that. As long as Chisos and you were the strong hand in this county, and backed me, whatever play I made was all right with the county commissioners. But with Chisos out from under now, and you financially wiped out, Fayette will pump the first wrong move I make, and start putting pressure on the county board, and the courthouse gang, and I'll be out of office."

She nodded dismally. "I'm afraid we've got too many people in this county who blow with the wind. Mayor Cabell. Judge Sewell. More than one county supervisor I could name—"

"Si," said Ramon Delcazar. "And right now, it looks like the wind has shifted to Elder Fayette. It looks like he will get his water from us small rancheros without any more trouble, eh? It used to be Chisos who protected us. And now, with him doing this, what chance have we? I still can't believe it. My best friend, Chisos Owens. Burning the very house he helped me build. Butchering my *pobre* cattle. Killing your uncle and your brother, Elgera . . ."

HE SHOOK his head morosely, sitting on the desk with his bare feet on Hagar's swivel chair. He was Lobos Delcazar's cousin, a slim young Mexican with the tails of his white cotton shirt flapping outside his cotton trousers, and a pair of black-buttled forty-fives strapped around on the outside of that.

"Montez came in yesterday from Per-simmon Gap," said Hagar. "Same story. Five hundred of his cattle run off: Spread ruined."

"Lobos," said Ramon. "You say you couldn't find his body?"

"No," said Elgera. "The last time I saw your cousin was just before he went out to change the guards at the mine. We

found several of my own hands dead, and three of those raiders. Natividad and I hid in the rocks until they left. He's still down at the Santiago with the wounded. All I brought north with me was that knife, Hagar."

"I'm sorry to see it," he said, looking at the sword. "I heard they were rising again, somewhere up in New Mexico. I didn't think it had to do with the raids that have been sweeping the Big Bend. I sort of thought Fayette and Beamont were behind them. Do you know what a macapan is, Elgera?"

"*Dios*," said Ramon, jumping off the desk. "Is that a macapan?"

"Who's rising again?" said *Señorita* Scorpion. "A macapan? What are you talking about?"

"The Montezuma cult," said Hagar somberly. "Not many people know about it. In 1846, when the United States went to war with Mexico, the Mexican government wasn't very sure just how loyal their northern province of New Mexico was. In order to strengthen that loyalty, the officials in Mexico City caused to be circulated in New Mexico, a manuscript, claiming that when Cortez had conquered the Aztecs of Mexico, in 1521, he had married an Indian princess named Malinche. According to this manuscript, Malinche was the daughter of an Indian emperor named Montezuma, who ruled the land to the north; thus, as part of her dowry, she brought to Cortez the province of what is now New Mexico. The whole story was a fabrication, of course, designed to prove to the Indians of New Mexico how much they owed allegiance to Mexico. In reality, Malinche was Cortez' mistress, hated by the Aztecs."

Ramon was watching Hagar with a strange intensity. "How can you be sure of that, Juanito?"

"It's a historical fact," said Hagar. "Also, there was no northern emperor named Montezuma. Montezuma II was in reality the ruler of the Aztecs at that time, and his death was brought about by Hernan Cortez. The Mexican government twisted these facts for their own use. The upper class Spaniards who ruled Mexico after Cortez were known as gauchupins. These tyrants have been hated bitterly and traditionally by the Indians of New Spain

for the last four centuries. Cortez was the first gauchupin, and when he caused Montezuma to be killed, it made Montezuma a martyr, and his name became the symbol for all gauchupin tyranny. The Mexican officials in 1846 knew how much sympathy the Indians had for the symbol, and used it in their document, not only to prove how conclusively New Mexico belonged to Mexico, but in a hope that the name would sway the Indians."

"It swayed them all right," said Ramon. "But not the way the Mexican government had planned. The manuscript had no effect as propaganda. You will remember that the Americanos took New Mexico with hardly a shot fired."

"What this manuscript really did," said Hagar, "was to start a strange new religion almost overnight, known as the Montezuma cult. The Papagos applied the name Montezuma to their Elder Brother, a god which had existed long before Hernan Cortez was born. The Pecos Indians claimed Montezuma had been born in their village. Was supposed to have worn golden shoes and walked to Mexico City, where the gauchupines confiscated them so he couldn't walk back. The Pecosenos kept a sacred fire burning night and day in their kiva, awaiting the return of Montezuma."

"And they use this sword . . . this macapan," said Elgera.



Johnny Hagar

"A MACAPAN is the sword of the ancient Aztecs," said Hagar. "I found out a lot of this from Waco Warren. You know him, Elgera. One of my deputies. Half-breed Comanche boy. He claims there's something going on in the Guadalupe. The Indians know a lot more about those things than we do. I'd take his word. If they are rising again, it's too bad. No telling who belongs to them and who doesn't. Could be all around us and we wouldn't even know it. Most of the peons down here have Indian blood in 'em. Get them soaked in red-eye and thinking they're descended from the Aztecs, and you have a Montezuma on your hands. I don't like it. Fanatics have tried to use the symbol of Montezuma before to unite the Indians against the white man down this way. You can understand how dangerous it would be, used by the wrong man—" he broke off, and his eyes darkened as he looked past Elgera, and his voice was suddenly brittle. "Oh, hello, *Señor Ortega*."

He carried a gold-handled cane over one arm, and rubbed his hands together in an oily way when he spoke. He was the kind of a man whose words hid from each other.

"*Buenas dias, Señor Hagar*," he said sibilantly. "My, ah consignment was not on the afternoon train. We thought, perhaps, that you could throw some light on the matter."

"Hell, Ortega," said Elder Fayette, shoving past him. "You beat around the bush too much. Say it straight. The rifles have disappeared, Hagar. By your order, it seems."

Fayette reminded *Señorita Scorpion* of Chisos Owens in that moment, standing with a stubborn, inexorable look to the forward thrust of his bulky shoulders. Teacup riders filled the doorway behind their boss, and spilled out across the sidewalk into the street, and Mayor Cabell had difficulty getting through them. He was a dowdy little man in a rumpled Prince Albert, his grey hair fringing a bald pate. He cleared his throat.

"Yes, sheriff," he said pompously. "Disappeared. *Señor Luis Ortega* is the army contractor, as you know. Or do you? Yes. Five hundred Henry repeaters, Hagar, consigned to Fort Leaton. That's a lot of guns to disappear. Yes, a lot of guns."

Hagar suddenly grinned. "Isn't it, mayor? You must be mistaken. Those guns were under civil jurisdiction till the army picked them up here at Alpine. I'm the only one with authority to issue any order releasing them. And I certainly didn't do that. There was an armed guard aboard the train, and I had two deputies down at the station waiting to hold the rifles till a troop from Fort Leaton came after them with the wagons. Nothing short of the U. S. Army could have gotten away with those guns."

"The sheriff of Terrel county," said Fayette heavily, "got a wire ordering him to unload the guns at Sanderson and hold them there for the troop from Fort Leaton. The wire was sent from here, under your authority, Hagar. Soldiers arrived at Sanderson, with the wagons, accompanied by one of your deputies, and took the guns."

"Yes." Mayor Cabell cleared his throat. "Yes. Took the guns. And now, a Captain Maryvaille is here with his army wagons, and a troop of cavalry, expecting to find the Henries waiting. He says Fort Leaton did not send any troop to Sanderson, and they have not received the guns."

"Perhaps," said Luis Ortega urbanely, "you can enlighten us, *Señor Hagar*."

The Teacup riders shoved in farther, and Elgera suddenly felt a strange suffocation. She turned from Fayette to Hagar, fists closing. A tall young captain pushed his way through the crowd, slipping off a white glove. His forage cap sat on his clipped blond hair jauntily, his arrogant face was flushed.

"Is this your sheriff, Mayor Cabell?" he asked in a loud voice. "I demand you put him under arrest immediately."

"Ah, *capitan*," interposed Ortega. "Surely we can settle this unfortunate error without such, ah, drastic measures. After all, if Sheriff Hagar made a mistake—"

"Diverting government supplies is a mistake," said the captain, fixing Ortega with his cold blue eye. "You're the contractor? I should think you'd be the first to want the culprit attended to. And you, sheriff. What in thunder did you plan to do with that many guns? I can't understand it."

Hagar turned calmly and took a big ring of keys off a peg on the wall,

then chose one carefully and inserted it in the lock on the barred door that opened into the corridor between the cells at the rear. At the other end of the corridor was the back door leading into an alley. Elgera began to edge between Hagar and Fayette. If Hagar wanted it that way, all right.

"What are you doing, sheriff?" said Cabell.

"I'm unlocking the door," smiled Hagar, watching them. "Is this your frame, Fayette?"

Fayette glanced imperceptibly at the Teacup riders behind him. "Frame?"

"Frame-up," said Hagar, opening the door unhurriedly. "I never sent any wire to unload the guns at Sanderson. The only way it could have come from this office was that one of my deputies sent it with my authority. Who did you reach, Fayette? Waco Warren? I don't think you could buy him. Nevada Wallace?"

Hagar had moved so calmly, so obviously, that none of them had realized his intention at first. Suddenly Fayette sensed it; he jumped forward.

"Don't let him get through that door. The back way—"

The sudden scuffling surge of men stopped as soon as it had begun. Fayette stood where he had taken the leap toward Hagar, a dull flush creeping into his heavy face. Elgera hadn't actually seen the movement of Hagar's hands. Somehow he held his guns now, and he was grinning easily, and backing through the door.

"I don't know what this is about," he said. "I'm not going to take any frame-up sitting down. Don't try to follow me—"

"Drop your iron, Johnny!"

As if jerked by a string, Johnny Hagar whirled and fired at the huge yellow-haired man in the rear door before he had finished shouting. It was Nevada Wallace, and his gun went off at the roof as he staggered backward into the alley, grabbing at the hand Hagar's slug had smashed.

Elgera threw herself at Fayette, tripping him over onto her own body as he jumped for Hagar again. The others swarmed past as she fell beneath Fayette's great weight. Desperately she caught at the captain's boot. He stumbled and kicked her hand free, and threw himself into the hallway as Hagar swung back. Elgera strug-

gled to get out from under Fayette, a sea of kicking, shuffling boots surrounding her.

"Get those guns," the captain shouted.

A Peacemaker boomed, and someone grunted sickly. Fayette got to his hands and knees above Elgera. She clawed at him, trying to kick his legs from beneath him again. He hit her in the face. Then he was off her, throwing himself into the struggling mass of men. She could see dimly that all but two were in the hallway fighting Hagar now. Mayor Cabell still stood between her and the door.

"Please." He cleared his throat. "Please. Johnny was the best sheriff this town ever had. Be careful. Yes."

The light from the front door was blocked off, then by the second man's body. He seemed to bend over Elgera from behind as she struggled to her hands and knees, dazed from Fayette's blow. She realized suddenly that the man had placed himself so as to hide her from the mayor, and she tried to jump erect. She caught a blurred view of mitaja leggings, and heard his voice soft in her ear.

"I, ah, regret this exceedingly, *señorita* . . ."

There was the sudden shocking pain. There was nothing.

"I AM GLAD to see you are regaining consciousness," the cultivated voice was saying. "It was an execrable thing to do, but necessary, you must agree. They would have put you away with Hagar, I think. Perhaps for aiding and abetting his escape, or trying to. The charge wouldn't have mattered. They just wanted their paws on you."

Into her vision swam the narrow, vulpine face of Luis Ortega. The hood of his cloak was thrown back, and his queued, black hair lay like a slick skullcap over the top of his thin head, gleaming in the light of an oil-lamp on the marble-topped table.

"You are in the Alpine Lodge," he said. "The Teacup riders Fayette left out in Second Street were very solicitous when I told them you had been, ah, incapacitated in the struggle. They even offered to accompany me to the doctor's office with you. A whole lot of them. They said they would wait outside. I did not know the doctor was such a good *amigo* of yours. It simplified matters. And that alley his

back door opens onto. *Gracias a Dios, señorita*, you are now hidden from them right under their very noses."

"Why?" said Elgera, and the springs squeaked as she swung her legs to the floor.

"Why?" he said. "Perhaps you will elucidate."

"Why did you get me out of it?" she asked. "What do you want?"

"Aha," he laughed softly, tilting his head back. "You are a singular judge of character, *señorita*."

She moved unsteadily to the window. The two-story Alpine Lodge stood on the northwest corner of Second and Main. She was on the second story of the side facing across Second to the Mescal Saloon on the southwest corner of Main and Second, and the sheriff's office farther down Second. A couple of Fayette's Teacup hands stood in the door of the sheriff's office. Another came out of a building farther down the street, looking toward them and shaking his head.

Elgera's eyes were caught by movement on Main; two more Teacup men had come out of Si Samson's livery stable on the other side of the street, and stood looking up toward the brick depot at the north end of town. Luis Ortega's oily voice startled her, coming from directly behind.

"*Si*, they are looking for you, *señorita*. Perhaps it was Fayette's meaning to get you and Hagar both out of the way at one blow, eh?"

She turned angrily. "Fayette was connected with that business about the guns then?"

Ortega shrugged his shoulders, and his words slid unctuously through a secretive smile. "You ask me? Perhaps many men are connected with it, *señorita*, whom you would never suspect were connected with it, and then again, perhaps many men whom you would suspect were connected with it, were not connected with it at all."

"I would suspect you were connected with it," she said, "in more ways than just that of the government contractor who doesn't seem at all worried about the money he stands to lose by the theft of his guns."

A mock hurt look tilted his brows; he held out his slim hand, opening his mouth as if to protest. Then his mobile lips slipped into that sly smile, and he began to chuckle sibilantly.

"*Si, señorita, si si*. Perhaps you are *correcto*. Let us say that I am a *hombre* who is not averse to making a few pesos on the side. And it is a fact that the more sides a *hombre* looks on, the more pesos he is likely to find."

"Saving me was one of those sides?"

"Ah, *señorita*, you do me an injustice," he said. "What *caballero* wouldn't throw his life at the feet of such a *carrissima*? You can have that free of charge. But, shall we say, there are others, ah, services I could render you . . ."

She turned away from the window. "I was ruined in that raid on my spread. I couldn't pay you for anything if I would. And I wouldn't."

He held up an ingratiating finger. "Ah, perhaps your cattle were killed and your home destroyed. But you have some, ah, liquid securities left. Not enough to do much against Fayette, perhaps, but enough I'm sure, to propitiate the sordid god of gold which I have the unfortunate weakness of worshipping."

She started for the door. "Thanks for helping me. I'm sure there's nothing I could want from you."

"Before you throw yourself to Fayette's dogs," he said, and it stopped her, and he began rubbing his thumb against his forefinger. "I see I must come to the point. How much would you give to find *Señor Chisos Owens*?"

ELGERA felt the blood drain from her face. Chisos? A wild look flashed in her eyes. She moved toward Ortega in a swift, tense way, like a cat about to leap.

"You know where Chisos is?"

Ortega took a step backward, holding up a hand: "I have certain connections, shall we say, which would assist you immeasurably in finding him. I am sure the Alpine National Bank would honor your check for, ah, ten thousand, yes, ten thousand dollars, made out in my name, if you would care to have access to those connections."

The shot outside was flat and muffled. There was another one. Someone yelled downstairs, then the thud of feet came from the hall. Elgera had started for the door again when in burst Waco Warren, one of Hagar's deputies, a half-breed Co-

manche with his buckskin leggings tucked inside old cavalry boots. He must have been falling when he thrust the door open. He hung onto the knob, and the portal swung in with his weight, carrying him on around with it till the door smashed against the wall. He went to his knees there with his head against the panels and his back toward Elgera, his fist still closed desperately on the knob.

"Elgera," he gasped, trying to rise. "They're taking Hagar away. Nevada. Fayette's man. Said they're taking him to Terrel County because the crime was committed there. You know that's a lie. They won't take him to Sanderson—"

She hadn't yet reached him when someone else ran into the doorway. A gun bellowed. Waco grunted in a sick, hollow way; he jerked on around and his shoulder brushed Elgera's outstretched hand as he fell on his face with his legs all twisted up under him.

Elgera didn't know just when she had drawn her gun. It must have been the reaction to the shot. She stood there with the big Army Colt levelled at the man in the doorway, and she had gotten it out soon enough, she realized, to have him covered before he even began to raise his own forty-fives from where they had been pointed at Waco Warren.

"Don't lift them any higher, Ramon," she said, and she was turned now so she could see Luis Ortega. "In fact, you'd better just drop them."

Ramon Delcazar's mouth opened slightly. Then his forty-fives made a metallic thud on the floor, one after the other. Ortega was bent forward with his gold-handled cane gripped in both hands as if he had started to do something with it. He straightened with an effort. His chuckle was weak.

"*Por Dios, señorita*, my eyes must be going bad in my old age. I did not see you draw that gun. How did it get in your hand?"

"Why," asked Elgera whitely, "did you have to do that?"

Ramon looked surprised. "I thought Waco was after you—"

Elgera didn't look at the dead man lying on the floor. She was trying to keep from feeling the horror of it. She was remembering how Hagar had said they

would be everywhere, now, if the cult was rising again, and that there would be no telling who belonged, and who didn't.

"Oh," she said. "You thought Waco was after me. Are you part, Quill, Ramon?"

Ramon nodded. "Si, My grandmother was a Quill. A pure-blood Indian of Mexico. And that makes me—"

He stopped suddenly, a strange look crossing his face. Elgera backed across the room and shoved up the window overlooking a shed roof that slanted down into the alley behind the Alpine Lodge.

"*Señorita*," said Ortega, "what about our, ah, arrangement."

The girl threw a slim leg over the sill. "I don't think I want your connections to help me locate Chisos, Ortega. I have some connections of my own, and they only play one side of the game at a time. Don't follow me for a while. I'd very much like an excuse to kill you, either of you!"

IV

In Tonalamente, the Book of Fate

All things are decreed and written.

For Chisos Owens it is now too late

John Hagar shall next be smitten.

THE CAMPFIRE winked small and lonely in the malignant darkness that cloaked the Barrillas, and that pressed in on Hagar with a frightening intensity as he sat cross-legged before the softly snapping flames, trying not to look at the circle of faces surrounding him, silent, inscrutable, waiting. Farther out, he could see the circle of wagons with U. S. Army showing vaguely on their blurred white tilts.

"You were the deputy with that troop of cavalry who got the rifles at Sanderson?" said Hagar thinly.

Lobos Delcazar was dumping coffee beans from a paper sack into a tin cup. He still wore his blue dragoon's coat with the red cuffs and collar, and his fringed sash twitched at his Blucher boots with each movement. He showed his white teeth in a grin.

"Sure, Hagar, that was me. I didn't have any trouble, as your deputy. We timed it nicely, no? I fixed the guards down

there at the Santiago so Chisos Owens could get through without any trouble, and left even before he got there, on my way to Sanderson to meet my troop of cavalry and pick up the guns."

"Oh," said Hagar, "It was you fixed the guards at the Santiago, and Elgera's uncle and kid brother? We sort of had Chisos pegged for that one. Why didn't you just shoot the girl in the back, too, while you were about it?"

"Do you think I am the kind who shoots woman, Johnny?" said Lobos, looking hurt, and then he grinned. "Besides, Elgera is too good with an iron. I don't think even you could edge her out. Why should I take chances with a wildcat like that when it wasn't necessary? Chisos Owens was supposed to have taken care of her. Nevada tells me he slipped up, though."

Nevada Wallace stood uncomfortably to one side, the firelight glinting on his curly yellow hair. The Peacemakers didn't have their rakish threat, somehow, on his thick hips; they looked ponderous and ineffectual. He must have coveted them for a long time. They were the first things he took from Hagar. He had taken the sheriff east, toward Sanderson, until they were out of sight of Alpine, then turned north into these mountains. The hand Hagar had wounded in the jail was bandaged. Nevada kept moving it around as if it hurt him, and his mouth took an ugly twist whenever he looked at Hagar.

"The girl hit town this morning," he said sullenly. "Fayette tried to get her when we hooked Johnny, here. She got away somehow. I think that Ortega had a hand in it."

Lobos poured water from a five-gallon army canteen into the coffee pot, sighing. "Si, I suppose Ortega did have a hand in it. He has a hand in most everything, it seems. Like that gun deal. Ortega found out Elder Fayette would pay him twice as much for those Henry repeaters as the army would. The army had already given him his payment, however—an outrageous price, by the way—and he didn't want to lose that. They could hardly demand a refund, though, if the guns were diverted by a party who could not possibly be identified with Ortega, could they? He was quite willing to sell the guns again, under those conditions."

"What did Fayette want with the guns?" asked Hagar thinly.

"He wanted to give them to us," said Lobos, and laughed. "I see you are confused. We wouldn't have fooled with Ortega or Fayette, understand, but we wanted those five hundred Henry repeaters, and were in no position to take them by force. Thus, we contracted to do a little job for Fayette, in return for his getting us the rifles. Ortega, as a government supply contractor, had access to a number of uniforms. Thus, Fayette's riders became a troop of cavalry. I couldn't use my own boys there, could I? Even that short-sighted Sanderson sheriff would have smelled some bad beans if I'd showed up with a bunch of Indians in U. S. cavalry uniforms. Nevada was the one who wired to unload the guns at Sanderson. There you have the whole little conspiracy. Fayette gets his job of work done. Ortega gets two prices for his guns. We get the guns. We even get you, as sort of a bonus. Nevada gets to be sheriff. Ah, how happy everybody is."

VERY CLEVER, thought Hagar, and he could feel the frustrated anger building up in him again. He had tried to control it all the way from Alpine. It was boiling near the surface now. He wondered how much longer he could hold it in. Very clever. So they had it all sewed up. Him all sewed up. Everything all sewed up. He put his manacled hands in his lap suddenly and knotted them together till his fingers hurt.

Outside the circle of wooden-faced Indians, a dozen white men were stripping off yellow-striped cavalry trousers and blue coats. Abilene came walking over, Elder Fayette's right bower, a lean taciturn man who had ridden with Nevada and Hagar from Alpine. He was constantly rolling wheatstraws, and Hagar guessed it was as good a way as any to keep his fingers supple for the big Beale-Remington he wore. Abilene studied the cigarette he was building, speaking in a toneless, impersonal voice.

"I'll take the Teacup boys back now. Coming, Nevada?"

Hagar looked up sharply. "Yeah. Go ahead, Nevada. You should make a good sheriff. I guess you've been with me long

enough to learn all the little tricks. Tell Cabell hello for me. Tell all my friends hello. I must have a lot of friends in Alpine."

"Shut up," said Nevada sullenly.

"I though you were my friend, Nevada," said Hagar. "That's funny, isn't it? I thought all of you were my friends. Lobos and Cabell and Ramon Delcazar and Waco Warren and you, Nevada . . ."

The yellow-haired man dropped his good hand to the white butt of a Peacemaker. "I said, shut up."

"Your trust is childish," laughed Lobos. "Fayette reached Nevada a long time ago. Promised him a spot in his set-up. Nevada's always had his eye on your job, and your guns. You should never trust anyone, Hagar. Look what Chisos Owens did to *Señorita* Scorpion. The girl will be the next one to turn on you—"

"Don't talk about her," said Hagar between his teeth.

"Why not?" said Lobos. "Women are the ones you should trust the least. I would rather turn my back on a sidewinder than a woman. And that wild girl. *Cara-coles!* She is the worst of all. She is just a little—"

Hagar's face twisted and he grunted with the effort of coming up off the ground and throwing himself across the fire at Lobos. He slammed his manacled wrists into Lobos' face. Straddling the man's body as it went down, he beat at him again. Over Lobos' yell, Hagar caught the scuffle of feet behind him. A blow on the head drove his face into Lobos' chest. He sprawled helplessly on the man beneath him. Lobos struggled out from under, scrambling to his feet. Hagar tried to rise to his hands and knees, but another savage blow put him flat again.

"That's enough, Nevada," shouted Lobos hoarsely.

Hagar rolled over spasmodically, throwing him arms up to guard his head. He could see the giant yellow-haired man bent over him, heavy face stamped with a brutal hatred.

"That's enough, I said!" screamed Lobos in a rage.

Nevada grunted as he struck again. Hagar caught the blow on his shoulder, crying out with the stunning pain. The gunshot drowned his voice. He heard

the thud of a six-shooter dropped by his head. Nevada's tremendous body crashed down, knocking the breath from Hagar. He was rolled toward Lobos, and he lay helplessly beneath Nevada, staring at the tall man in the blue dragoon's coat. Still holding his smoking Colt, Lobos Delcazar moved toward Hagar. His face was livid with rage, and bleeding where Hagar had smashed him with the handcuffs.

He stooped to roll Nevada off the sheriff. Hagar felt his body grow rigid. He lay there, stunned and sickened, knowing whatever he did now was no good, and his eyes opened wide and clear as he stared up at Lobos, because that was the way he would take it whenever it came.

Lobos' body was trembling perceptibly, and his gusty breathing had a harsh, uncontrollable sound. His black eyes glittered, the pupils dilating and contracting, and his lips writhed across his white teeth without any sound. He held his Colt pointed at Hagar's head. Hagar could see his finger quivering on the trigger.

SUDDENLY, Lobos took a ragged breath and straightened with a jerk, turning away as if to find control, and his voice shook. "All right. All right, Hagar. If it was up to me, I'd kill you for that. But it isn't up to me. Maybe this way is better. Killing a man finishes it off so quick anyhow. You'll pay, Hagar, more than you can imagine, you'll pay."

The men around the fire had all risen, and were just settling back now, watching Lobos or Hagar. Lobos untied his gaudy neckerchief and stooped to the big Army canteen. He wet the silk cloth and began to wipe his bleeding face. Squatting there, still holding his gun in one hand, he looked up at Abilene.

"You tell Fayette if he doesn't like what happened he can send another one of his sheriffs out and I'll do the same with him," said Lobos. "Tell him to send you, Abilene. Yeah. Tell Fayette to send you."

Abilene's quaque eyes were as impersonal as his toneless voice. "Never mind. We didn't figure on using Nevada. He was too dumb to make the kind of tin badge Fayette wants. You saved us a piece of business, that's all."

He turned and rounded up the Teacup riders who had posed as troopers, and they

filtered silently out through the wagons toward the horses. Still dabbing at his face, Lobos took the boiling coffee off the rocks and began to pour it into the tin cups. Hagar rolled over on his belly, shaking his head dazedly. The men around the fire were all watching him now, faces unreadable. There wasn't a white man among them.

Lobos held out a cup of coffee. "Go ahead, Johnny. It's all over now. You'll need something. We've got a long trip ahead."

Hagar took the cup, holding it dazedly in his hand. Lobos unbuckled his own gunbelt and turned to take Hagar's ivory-handled weapons off Nevada. He caressed one of the white butts.

"You know," he said. "I'm sort of glad it happened this way. I always thought these guns would look nice on me."

He laughed suddenly, and shoved the holsters down snug against his legs. Hagar stared at Nevada's body. He turned away, sickened. Lobos jerked his head toward the dead man; two of the Indians rose and dragged Nevada away.

"Go ahead," he said. "Drink it, Hagar. Make you feel better, eh? Everything's over now, drink it."

Hagar took a sip, grimaced. "Tastes like alkali."

Lobos looked into the fire, a peculiar lack of focus to his eyes, and he grinned inanely. "Si, it sometimes does. You will get used to it after a while."

Hagar took another drink. "What do you mean? What's your cut in this, Lobos? Did Fayette promise you a soft spot in his county? Or cash on the barrel-head?"

Lobos looked at Hagar without seeming to see him. "Neither, Hagar. I do not care to have a job with Fayette's bunch when he climbs into Brewster County's saddle, because he won't sit there very long. And whatever we do is not for money."

"We?" said Hagar, and looked around at the silent group again. They were drinking coffee too, watching him over the rims of their cups. He suddenly felt dizzy. Then his head seemed to expand like a balloon. The tin cup clinked against a rock as he dropped it.

"We?" he said again, and giggled drunkenly.

Lobos laughed too. "Yes, we. Not these men, specifically, though they belong to us."

"Us?" said Hagar, wondering what the hell was wrong with him. "What kind of coffee was that, Lobos? Us?"

Lobos took several reddish beans from his pocket and popped one into his mouth, chewing it slowly. "It was partly coffee. Si. Sometimes we drink it that way. Mostly we take it like this—" he put another bean in his mouth—"the traditional way."

Hagar giggled foolishly, swaying forward suddenly. "Whaddaya mean? Whaddaya talking about?"

"You will find out, *Señor* Hagar, and when you do, believe me, you will wish you hadn't."



Chisos Owens

SHE WAS an old woman with a furrowed face the color of worn saddle-leather, sitting cross-legged in the smoky wickiup somewhere north of Horsethief Crossing on the Pecos. She was a Comanche, with her stringy grey hair braided over her right shoulder and falling down in front of her greasy buckskin shift. She was Waco Warren's mother.

"So they killed my son," she said dully, and her utter grief shone in her eyes. "I know Ramon Delcazar. I didn't think he

was the kind to shoot his friends in the back. But they are rising again, and how can we know who are our enemies anymore, and who are our friends?"

She rocked slowly back and forth over the fire, hugging skinny arms tight against her chest. Elgera Douglas sat across from the old woman. The shimmering beauty of her long blonde hair was filmed with dust, and a burning, feverish look marked her face. Finally the hag spoke again.

"How did you escape from them, *muchachita*?"

Señorita Scorpion shrugged wearily, forced to admire the woman's stoicism. "The alley behind the Alpine Lodge runs between Second and First. The Alamo Saddlery fronts on Second, has a store-room behind which opens onto the alley. I hid in there till night. Fayette's men had all the streets out of town blocked and were stopping all the riders coming or going. They couldn't guard every inch. I slipped out by them on foot and hiked to Marathon where I got this horse."

Little by little the Indian's grief began to seep through, and her voice shook now, though she tried to control it. "You found Hagar in Sanderson?"

Elgera shook her head. "They didn't take him there."

The first hoarse sob escaped the old woman. Then she began to hum under her breath, a monotonous, choked sound, with her seamed face appearing from the smoke as she swayed forward, and disappearing again as she swayed back. Her hollow intonation grew louder, and Elgera realized it was the death chant for Waco Warren.

"He was a good boy," muttered the old woman in a stifled, sing-song voice. "It didn't matter if he was a half-breed. John Warren was a good man, and Waco Warren was his son, and my son, and he was a good boy. He worshipped Johnny Hagar like one of our old gods. And now Waco Warren is gone to our old gods. And Johnny Hagar is gone too. First it was Chisos Owens. Now Johnny Hagar. You would follow them of your own free will?"

"They didn't take Hagar to Sanderson," said Elgera tensely. "Where did they take him? What are they doing to him? I've got to go after him. Maybe it's too late for Chisos. But Hagar—"

"You don't realize what you say." The old woman's voice was a hollow chant. "You don't realize what it means to go after them. They have many powers which you or I do not understand. They are all around us. We cannot say who belongs to them, and who doesn't. Chisos Owens has lost his soul to them. Johnny Hagar is now in their hands. You do not know what you are saying."

Elgera's voice sounded desperate. "I do. I can't sit by and see this happen to them. They're my friends."

"You will avenge my son's death?"

"If I can. How?"

"The only way you can help Hagar, the only way you can stop all this, is to reach the one who thinks he is the reincarnation of Montezuma, and kill him," the old woman said in a sudden burst of viciousness. Then she resumed her chanting. "That would avenge my son's death. But only those who pay homage to the gods of ancient Atzalan know where Montezuma reigns. I do not worship Quetzalcoatl, but I am an Indian, and know many things the white man does not know. I can tell you that somewhere in the Guadalupe the Montezumans are gathering."

"I didn't think even the Indians knew what was in those mountains," said Elgera.

The old woman nodded, swaying back and forth more swiftly. "The Guadalupe is inaccessible in many places, and my people have never penetrated them. But the Montezumans are gathering. From as far south as Mexico City come Quills, and from the Sierra Madres come Yaquis, and from Chihuahua and Durango come Mexicans who claim to be descended from the ancient Aztecs. Each month on the first night of the full moon, the new ones gather at the deserted Apache Mine south of Pecos, and one of Montezuma's techutlis comes to get them."

"Techutlis?"

"The techutlis are a knightly order of the Aztecs," muttered the hag. "This techutlis leads the newcomers westward from the Apache Mine, traveling only at night, and no white man knows of their coming or going. But the Comanches do, and the Apaches. Yet, even my people have only been able to trail them as far as the outer slopes of the Guadalupe. Those warriors who followed them in, never came

back. Do you still wish to go, *mucha-chita?*"

"I told you," said Elgera grimly.

Waco Warren's mother began to nod her head in a sharper rhythm now, and tears were streaming from her eyes, and it cost her more of an effort to go on talking. "Very well. In two days the moon will be full again. A new group will be meeting at the mine, and the techutli will come for them. You will be one of their number. Pues, the Montezuma's know you are looking for them. Your blonde hair would mark you as quickly as the gold color of your palomino marks it as your horse. You will not go as Elgera Douglas."

Elgera felt her breathing become heavier, and she licked nervous lips, watching the old woman sway toward her through the smoke, and sway away from her, and unconsciously she began to sway slightly too, and the smoke rose up to envelope her, thick and choking and black, and funereal in its portent.

V

*This portal's guard is Tlaloc
The God of Evil and Sin
Death is the key to its lock
Doomed are who enter herein.*

THE TWO MEN sat hunched over in their saddles with backs to the wind that mourned down off the ridge like the plaint of a lost soul, fluttering the brim of Elder Fayette's hat against its crown with a constant, slapping sound. His heavy mackinaw was torn and burned down one side, and the granitic planes of his face were covered with dark smudges, and there was a livid scar across one weathered cheek that might have been made by a bullet. His big-knuckled hands were gripped tight on the saddle horn. The hard line of his mouth was twisted with the rage that shook him whenever he thought of what had happened.

"I might've known this is what I'd get, doing business with a loco Indian like that," he muttered through locked teeth. "All he helped me get Chisos and Hagar for was so I'd get those guns for him. It isn't any gauchupines he wants to burn—it's every white man in Texas, with me

in the same warsack as the rest!"

Abilene was rolling a cigarette. "Five thousand cows. That's a lot of beef to mill in the river till they drown. Nobody else but Chisos Owens could've gotten through our boys to do it. I guess Montezuma knew what he was doing when he hitched Chisos to his team instead of killing him."

Elder Fayette's voice trembled slightly. "Maybe he thinks I won't come after him. Maybe he thinks wiping out my spread finished me like it did the others. I won't be finished till I find him. I swear to God, Abilene, I'll find him and tear his heart out with my bare hands—"

He stopped, breathing heavily. The round glow of Abilene's cigarette bobbed in the darkness. Fayette looked downslope in the direction Abilene had indicated. The first of the calvalcade was hardly visible, winding down the bottom of the narrow canyon, mere shadows against the darker rise of the opposite ridge. Fayette kept his voice down with an effort.

"For once, Ortega was telling the truth. The Apache Mine on the first night of the full moon. This canyon on the third. That's about right for the distance, if they don't do any daytime riding."

"That isn't like Ortega, the truth," said Abilene. "Maybe he wanted you to follow them in. Maybe he'd just as soon have you out of the way as Montezuma."

"And maybe I'll kill him, too, when I find him," grunted Fayette. "You coming?"

Abilene flipped his wheat straw away. "As long as you pay me on the first of every month I'll follow any trail you put your horse to."

Fayette took a heavy breath and turned his Choppo horse down through the timber toward the calvalcade. Near the edge of the trees, Abilene gighed his mount up suddenly and grabbed Fayette's arm. They halted and waited there in a thick stand of somber aspen while a pair of ghostlike riders padded through the timber just below them, some distance up from the main party in the bottom of the canyon. Fayette held his mare there for an interval, and another pair of flankers rode by. Then he nodded, and pushed forward into the open, sidling down the slope toward the tail of the calvalcade. He and Abilene had

almost reached it when above them they heard the faint sound of a third pair of outriders passing through the timber they had left.

One of the last riders in the main line turned toward them as they trotted in. All Fayette could see was the dim flash of eyes from beneath a rebozo that served as both hood and veil. They might have been dark eyes, but the night gave them a strange bluish gleam. A woman?

"You shouldn't fall behind like that, señores," said someone from farther ahead. "The techutli will kill you if you lag."

"Si," muttered Fayette, and saw the woman turn away.



Luis Ortega

DAWN lightened the morning sky from the east, and ground-fog wreathed up around Fayette's legs, chilling him. He could see how high they really were now. The terrain dropped away behind him in a dim dawn glow for what must have been a hundred miles. Out of the bluish-gray fog rose the peaks they had passed, and beyond that a vast expanse of salt flats he knew to exist somewhere south of the Guadalupe.

Fayette glanced sharply to his right. A pair of riders who had been flanking the cavalcade all night sat over there, dim haunting shapes on vague shadow-horses. There was another pair on the other side.

And two more were closing in silently from behind.

An indurate look crossed Fayette's dusty, smudged face, and he hunched bulky shoulders down into his mackinaw and gave his Choppo the boot, following the others down the slope ahead.

Nothing would stop him from reaching Montezuma. It was what he had come here to do; he would do it. In his utterly single-purposed mind it was as simple as that. And the rage that had been building in him ever since his spread had been burned was a hot, writhing, living thing that swept all doubt or questioning from his thoughts, leaving only the savage, driving desire to get his hands on the Indian.

They turned into a valley that soon became a narrow canyon, and then a knife-blade cut, with walls so steep that the pinkish morning light faded into a darkness as cold as the night they had left behind. Finally the cavalcade was halted, and the riders began to dismount. Fayette saw that a file of Montezuma's techutli had been waiting for them in the cut here, tall haw-beaked men with exotic plumed head-dresses, gleaming bronze bodies naked but for the gilt-edged loin cloth Fayette had heard Ortega call a maxtli. Striking a discordant note in their barbaric appearance was the bandolier of cartridges each man wore slung over his shoulder, and the bright new Henry repeater crooked in his arm. Sight of that brought a thin rage into Fayette's red-rimmed eyes.

They began gathering up the horses, and leading them toward another canyon that opened into this one from the side, and Fayette was turned away when the techutli came to take the reins of his jaded Choppo. Past the dismounted crowd, Fayette had seen what he first took to be the box end of the canyon; now he realized that huge square blocks of granite had been set into the knife-blade cut, forming a wall some fifty feet high that closed the canyon off completely. One of the blocks had been swung out at the base of the wall, leaving a dark tunnel that must have led on through. Fayette couldn't see the other side.

The woman in the rebozo turned to him, and there was something about the lithe movement of her body that he seemed to remember. She was tall, even in flat-

heeled rawhide huiraches, and a lock of thick black hair curled from beneath her shawl. She wore a split buckskin skirt, dirty and greasy now, belted around her slim waist by a string of hammered silver bosses.

Fayette bent forward. "Don't we know each other?"

"I am Lola Salazar," she said. "I danced in the Alamo Saloon at San Antonio."

"I've been there," he said. "I don't remember you."

"I remember you," she said, and nodded her head toward the rock wall. "That is Tlaloc's Door. They will inspect each one of us as we go through. They'll see you're an *Americano*, señor."

"Will they?" he said, and reached up for her rebozo, saying, "Lola Salazar?"

SHE STRUCK his hand down and whirled and ran toward the crowd. A pair of armed techutli were standing by the door, stopping each man or woman as they passed through. Fayette took a step after the girl, then shrugged, turning to Abilene. The lean impersonal man nodded, taking a drag on his wheatstraw.

"You know what to do when we reach the door?" said Fayette.

"Go through it," said Abilene. "You take care of the two boys there, I'll cover your tail. We'll make it."

Four techutli were coming up behind Abilene, and one of them looked intently at Fayette's face, and began to come forward faster. There were only three of the crowd left to go through the door. One was passed by the guards there, then the next. The girl was last; she said something in Spanish, the guard nodded, she disappeared into the dark tunnel.

"*Un momento, señores*," the man behind Abilene said. "*Eres Americanos?*"

"*Americanos?*" said the guard at the door, and whirled around.

Fayette took the three leaps to him and smashed him back against the wall, wrenching the Henry from his surprised grasp. The second techutli there spun around and pulled his rifle into his belly for a spot shot. Fayette whirled, swinging his weapon around in a vicious arc that caught the man in the face. The techutli's Henry exploded into the air as he crashed back

into the rocks and slumped to the ground.

Fayette tried to whirl around again to the man he had taken the rifle from, and dodge at the same time. But the Indian was already on him, grappling for the gun. Abilene's Beale-Remington boomed, and someone screamed, and it boomed again. Then another techutli threw himself on Fayette, and the big man went down beneath the two struggling Indians, still holding the rifle in both hands and jerking it back and forth savagely.

A rawhide huirache slammed him in the face. Spitting blood, he butted his head upward and caught a man in the belly, carrying him back to the wall. He let go the rifle and got his hands in the techutli's long black hair and beat his head against the stones once. He dropped the dead weight of the man and whirled.

The other Indian had gotten the rifle. He had it above his head, and even as Fayette came around, he saw that whatever he did would be futile, and that kind of a blow would finish it.

With the rifle coming down, the techutli suddenly gave a spasmodic grunt. Instead of putting his full weight into the blow, the Indian let go the rifle and fell forward against Fayette. The Henry bounced off Fayette's shoulder. He stepped back and let the man fall to the ground on his face.

The girl still stood in the bent-over position she had reached after striking the man; the rifle she had scooped off the ground was held in both hands, still a little off the ground. She dropped it, and straightened. Abilene jumped over one of the men he had shot behind her, holding his smoking Beale-Remington in one hand, and his cigarette in the other. Farther back, more techutli were coming from the canyon they had taken the horses to.

"You come back, to do that?" said Fayette, looking at the girl with his surprise still in his face, and then glancing at the man lying at his feet.

"Do you know what it means to be captured by them?" she panted. "I couldn't let that happen even to you—Elder Fayette!"

She turned and ran into the tunnel. Fayette's mouth opened slightly; then he turned and followed her, and Abilene came behind him, and the black shadows swallowed them greedily.

VI

*Dance upon my coffin, hombres
Naught but death can be my goal.
Make the darkness ring with tombes
The red peyote has my soul.*

SOMETIMES he had a dim memory of another life, far away from this one, and sometimes it seemed to him that he had been known by another name. They called him Quauhtl now, which meant the Eagle, and was a good name, they said, for the war-lord of Atzalan. Often he would sit cross-legged like this on the first terrace of the House of the Sun, trying to remember that other life, that other name.

He was a big man, Quauhtl, with shoulders that revealed their singular size even under the mantle of brilliant egret feathers he wore. His heavily-muscled torso had a ruddy look, as if freshly exposed to the sun, and his square, solid flanks were covered meagerly by a maxtli fringed with fur.

From where he sat on this giant pyramid, he could look across the broad valley to where the mountains rose in purple haze many miles away; he could follow with his eye the winding Road of Death that led to the narrow canyon in those mountains which contained Tlaloc's Door, the only entrance of exit from this City of the Sun People. Absently, he took a reddish bean from a pouch at his waist and popped it skilfully into his mouth, chewing it slowly. His eyes seemed hard to focus, and he smiled inanely. It always affected him that way. Peyote. His religion, now. The beans were mild compared with the ritual performed every month, five days after the first full moon, in the sacred fire-chamber where the eternal blaze was kept aglow for Montezuma, and for the gods of Atzalan. There, for five days and five nights, with the tombes beating out their monotonous rhythm and the fires burning red, the techutlis made peyote anew. For many days after that Quauhtl lived in a wild haze; he could recall only vaguely the rides to the outer world where he fought the gauchupin, pillaging and burning and looting. Then, in about three weeks, the effects of peyote began to wear off, and instead of remembering battles and war, he would begin to recall that other life, and that other name. But before anything became clear, he was

taken to the fire-chamber again, and treated to peyote anew.

All around him were gigantic pyramids such as the House of the Sun. Most of them had been built by people from Atzalan many centuries before, and were in ruin. Only recently had Tlateotl Montezuma set out to rebuild them. Every month a new party of workers arrived, and new warriors, and new slaves, and just this morning another group of them had come marching down the Road of Death from Tlaloc's Door.

They were in the courtyard below Quauhtl now, and soon, he knew, they would begin their revelry, as they always did the night after their arrival. They had to be inculcated into peyote, too, for it was their religion. They would do it in the courtyards, however, for only the knightly order of the techutli were ever allowed in the sacred kivas. He was a techutli; he was a great warrior, so they told him. He sighed heavily, popping another bean into his mouth. He didn't know. Sometimes he could remember being a warrior. Sometimes he couldn't remember anything.

Just now, he couldn't think.

Quauhtl felt the first throbbing of the tombe, now. He could see one of the ceremonial drummers beating his huge skin drum on the first terrace of the House of the Moon, across the courtyard. Another tombe took up the rhythm, slowly at first, an interval of perhaps half a minute between each echoing thump.

The gaudy feathered mantle swirled around Quauhtl's great frame as he rose and moved toward the steps leading from the House of the Sun down to the courtyard. His heavy Bisley .44 sagged against his bare leg, and he shifted the cartridge belt with a hairy hand. Already fires had been lighted in the braziers. He stopped by one, finding the huge Guadalajara jars of mescal, pouring a drink into a smaller clay olla. He drank deep, leaving only a few drops to toss over his shoulder for the God of Revelry.

"Tezteotl," he muttered, "may you be drunk forever," and then laughed thickly and turned to watch the dancers.

The tombes were beating faster now, and more drums had joined in, and the high notes of a flute added their

erie call, rising and falling on the last red light of a dying afternoon. Some of the men and women kicked off their *huiraches* and began the *Matachine*, the dance of *Malinche*, their bare feet slapping against the checkered marble floor in time with the *tombes*. *Quauhtl* saw one swarthy half-breed in rawhide *chivarras* pulling a woman into the dance. She was trying to break free from his greasy hands, looking around her wildly.

"*Pelada!*" the man shouted at her, tearing her *rebozo* off.

Her hair had been piled up beneath the shawl, and it fell in a blue-black cascade about the shoulders of her silk blouse. *Quauhtl* felt his huge rope-scarred fists close slowly. Where had he seen that one before? She was no *charro* girl, brought in to marry one of the slaves. The half-breed stood there a moment, holding the *rebozo* in one hand, staring stupidly at the woman. Perhaps he had never seen one so beautiful before. Her rich lips curled around something she spat at him. The half-breed flushed, then made a lunge at her.

"*Dios,*" he shouted, "*que una bella. . .*"

She whirled from him, trying to run, but the crowd got in her way. The breed caught her arm, pulling her toward him. The others were laughing and calling to them now, and the woman looked around like some wild animal caught in a trap. There was something about the flushed look of her face, the stormy flash of her eyes that drew *Quauhtl* irresistibly. He started shoving his way through the crowd, grabbing a man's shoulder to thrust him aside.

"*Bribon,*" the Indian yelled, turning to grab at a *Bowie* in his belt. Then he saw who it was, and stumbled backward. "*Quauhtl,*" he muttered. "*Techutli Quauhtl. . .*"

Quauhtl shoved on, hardly hearing it. The breed had the struggling girl in his arms now and was laughing drunkenly, trying to kiss her as he jerked her out onto the dance floor. *Quauhtl* reached out a heavy hand and caught the breed's arm, squeezing as he pulled.

The man's face twisted and he jerked around, releasing the girl as he tried to twist free. *Quauhtl* spun him on around almost indifferently and then gave him a

shove. The breed stumbled backward, tripped, fell.

"*Barrachon!*" he said hoarsely, grabbing for his gun as he rolled over and started to get up. "*Cabron. Indio—*"

Then he stopped cursing, and stopped trying to get up. His mouth stayed open a little, and a fascinated look came into his eyes as he stared at *Quauhtl*. There was an ineffable menace to the big man standing there with his great shoulders thrust forward slightly, settling his weight a little into his square hips. His craggy face didn't hold much expression, and his dull eyes hardly seemed to be looking at the breed. The wailing flute had died, and the drums were slowing down. The breed licked his lips, and began moving away in a crawl, and then stopped again.

"*Dios,*" he almost whispered. "You wanted her. Go ahead, take her. Go ahead."

Quauhtl waited a moment longer. Then he grinned inanely, and turned his back on the man. The flute rose shrilly, and the drums thundered into life again. The breed scrambled to his feet and disappeared into the crowd, casting a last pale look over his shoulder. *Quauhtl* caught at the woman, not surprised that she didn't resist this time. He was their war-lord, wasn't he?

He began to spin her, slapping his feet against the floor in the traditional steps of the *Matachine* which they had taught him. The sweat broke out on his forehead and the peyote heated his blood, and he threw his head back and roared, spinning faster and faster. The girl tossed her head wildly, a strange look on her face. She seemed to abandon herself to the mad beat of the drums, whirling with him till her skirt whipped up about bare legs, her hair swirled in a perfumed curtain about his face. The other dancers began to pull away from them, watching.

"*Quien es?*" shouted someone.

"She is *Lola Salazar,*" answered a man. "She was a dancer in *San Antone*, she said. *Por Dios,* I believe it."

"No," shrilled a woman from farther away. "She is no *Lola Salazar*. You wanted *Malinche*? There she is. The daughter of *Montezuma*. The bride of *Cortez*. Come back to rule beside our *Tlatoani*."

"*Malinche,*" howled a *Yaqui*, and the

others took it up in a crazy chant that kept time to the tombes. "Malinche, Malinche, Malinche. . . ."

QUAUHTL saw the look in her eyes then, and realized she had been watching him all the time that way, and now, as if she had waited for the swelling roar of sound to drown out what she said, he saw her red lips part in a word, and didn't know whether he actually heard it, or read it in the shape of her mouth.

"Chisos," she almost sobbed. "Chisos..."

"What?" he shouted. "Chisos? I am Quauhtl."

"Don't you know me, Chisos?" she panted, whirling in close to him. "Elgera. Don't you remember? What have they done to you? What have they done to Hagar. Please, Chisos—"

The echoing crash of a great cymbal drowned her voice, Quauhtl spun to a stop, with his feathered cloak settling about his bare legs, and the intense silence hurt his ear-drums. The flute had stopped, the drums had stopped, everything had stopped. He was still holding the slim, lithe woman when the voice came from above. It wasn't a loud voice. It was sibilant and cultivated. Quauhtl saw the flush drain from the woman's face, leaving it suddenly pale.

"The Lord Montezuma would see this woman, Quauhtl. Bring her to the House of the Sun at once. It is his command!"

Elgera Douglas followed Chisos Owens through the silent crowd of men and women, feeling their eyes on her all the way. She had lost Fayette at Tlaloc's Door. They had gone through it and gained the inside before they had seen more techutli coming toward them on the Road of Death, drawn by the gun-fire. Abilene and Fayette had disappeared into the timber on the slopes inside the door, but Elgera had caught up with the rest of the newcomers who had already gotten through, and lost herself among them. Waco Warren's mother had dyed Elgera's hair and brows black, and given her the clothes, and she was tanned deeply by the sun, and up to now had passed for the dancer from San Antone.

Chisos guided her up the stairway with a heavy hand on her elbow, and kept looking at her in a strange, puzzled way, his

eyes clouded and dull. Behind, the tombes had begun to beat again, and the flute wailed. On the first level of the terraced pyramid stood a large screen of parrot feathers, hiding a statue from the profane eyes of the commoners below. The idol was carved from shining black obsidian, representing a man, ears bright with ear-rings of gold and silver, lips painted with gilt. Upon its head was a golden mitre, and in its right hand a sickle, and over the shoulders was thrown a magnificent white robe.

"You like the *itzli señorita*?" said a soft voice from behind them. "It is a statue of Quetzalcoatli, the Serpent God."

She turned slowly, hiding her surprise well enough. It was the same voice which had ordered her brought to the house of the Sun, and she had recognized it below, and she recognized it now. There was something puzzled in Luis Ortega's dark, vulpine face as he bent forward to study her.

"Lola Salazar? Is that what they said your name was? Have we met?"

"I danced in San Antone," said Elgera huskily.

He tilted his head toward the stairs leading up to the second terrace, and allowed Chisos to lead the way. "Ah, *si*, San Antone. I have been there. *Pues*, no *señorita*, the techutli who brought you newcomers here has already told Tlatoani Montezuma of your singular beauty. And now the people have begun to think you are Malinche. It has been written in Tonalamente, the Book of Fate, that she should be reincarnated along with Montezuma. And if our lord thinks you are Malinche, you will be empress of all Texas, *señorita*."

They passed a pair of wooden-faced guards at the third terrace, Ortega caught Elgera's elbow, slowing her so that Chisos pulled ahead of them on the next stairway up. Elgera shook Ortega's hand off.

"You mean Montezuma wants me to—"

ORTEGA nodded his head vigorously. "*Si, si*, he has been waiting for Malinche's return. And as I say, if he thinks you are Malinche, you will marry him and rule with him. *Asi*, you will need someone to help you along here, someone to smooth the bumps that will inevitably arise among such strange people. I know

their ways, their rituals, their gods. A personal advisor, shall we say? *Si*, a personal advisor."

"What do you get out of it?"

He raised his eyebrows in that hurt look. "Ah, *señorita*, not what I get out of it, but rather what you get—"

"I know you, Ortega."

"*Dios*," he said, and then chuckled, "it would seem my reputation has spread farther than I thought. All right, *señorita*. Montezuma means to wipe the white man from Texas. He is *loco*, but that is beside the point. As empress, you will have access to, ah, certain things which would benefit me to some extent."

She couldn't help smiling faintly. "Anything that could be converted into cash, you mean."

He grinned slyly. "You *do* know me, don't you?"

"And you'd rather Montezuma wasn't aware of this little arrangement," she said.

"*Señorita*," he chuckled. "how well we understand one another."

At each of the seven terraces there was another pair of guards, all with Henry repeaters, not seeming to be aware of the girl as she passed. With the tombes pulsing behind them, they reached the top. In the center of the final level was a building built of the same blocks of porphyry which formed the pyramid, covered with a polished coat of lime that shone weirdly in the red afternoon sunlight. Ortega muttered something to the guard at the door. The tremendous oak doors stood open, with curtains shutting off the entrance, embroidered heavily with silver and gold. They clanged metallically as the guard pulled them aside.

Ortega and Elgera walked down a huge collonaded hall with fires burning in stone braziers along the walls faced with gleaming alabaster; their footsteps echoed dismally on the smooth floors, coated with ochre and polished till they shone dully. The girl was ushered through a portico decorated with grotesque carvings of serpents, and into a great audience chamber. She stopped short, with her first look at Montezuma.

He sat on a dais across the floor of checkered black and white marble. His majestic head was crowned by a copilli, a golden mitre that rose to a point above his

forehead and fell down behind his neck. There were three other hallways leading from the room, one on either side of the high-backed throne, and one directly behind it.

Ortega led *Señorita* Scorpion across the great hall. Her glance was fixed on Montezuma's darkly ascetic face, and there was something about the peculiar lack of focus in his eyes that reminded her of Lobos Delcazar.

"This is the woman?" said Montezuma, and the hollow rumble of his voice startled Elgera. "Did you do business with her, Ortega?"

Luis Ortega's lithe body seemed to stiffen. "*Que?*"

"Like you tried to do business with Elgera Douglas?" said Montezuma. "Ramon Delcazar has come from Alpine. He tells me it was you who helped the blonde girl escape from the sheriff's office there."

Ortega's voice was suddenly obsequious. "Ah, Tlatoani Montezuma, only to better serve your interests. I was leading her to you."

"Better to serve *your* interests, *you* mean," said Montezuma. "If you had left her alone to be taken along with John Hagar, she would have been handed over to Lobos Delcazar, and would have been in my hands now. You have been talking with a forked tongue long enough, Luis Ortega. I am glad to see you brought me this woman promptly. You have at least carried out your last duty without a mishap."

Ortega's eyes darted around the room in a sudden, fearful way. "My . . . last duty, Tlatoani?"

MONTEZUMA waved his hand imperiously. A pair of stalwart guards stepped from the squad standing to one side of the throne, moving with a swift, measured tread toward Ortega. He took a step backward.

"No," he almost whispered, and then his voice began to rise. "Tlatoani Montezuma, I swear I am your slave. My life is yours. I would never do anything against your interests. *No, no, no—*"

The last was a scream, and he turned and darted toward the curtained doorway of the hallway to the right of the throne.

Two guards appeared through the hangings. Ortega whirled back. The other pair of guards came up from behind him. He struck at one with his cane, stumbled backward, then they had him, wrenching his arms behind his back.

"No," he screamed. "*Señorita*, don't let them do this to me. They will sacrifice me to Quetzalcoatl. No. Tlatoani. *Señorita*. Empress. Malinche—"

Writhing and screaming, the two husky techutlis carried him through the door at the rear of the throne. Montezuma waited till his howls had died away down the corridor. Then he bent forward, and his eyes were suddenly glittering intensely at Elgera, and she felt herself swept with a strange dizziness.

"Malinche," he intoned, and there was a fanatical sincerity in his voice. "They were right. You are Malinche. We shall wed before Quetzalcoatl and rule all of Texas. The white man shall burn with the gauchupin, for they are all tyrants, and my people shall have the land that belonged to their ancestors."

The sound hadn't been audible at first, above the throbbing background of tombes. But now Elgera saw Montezuma's great head tilt upward, as if he were listening. She heard the gunshots, too.

From the corridor leading off to the right, a guard burst through the curtains and dropped them behind him with a clang. He stumbled toward the throne, holding bloody hands across his belly.

"Tlatoani Montezuma," he gasped, and fell to his knees. "*Esta que barrachon* Elder Fayette. *Esta Fayette!*"

He fell over on his face, and didn't say anything else, and wouldn't be saying anything else again, ever. Elgera saw the faint rise of Montezuma's great bronze chest beneath his feathered mantle. It was the only sign he gave. He raised his hand, about to say something. Before he could speak, a guard ran into the chamber from the other corridor that led out to the front of the pyramid.

"*Esta Abilene*," he shouted. "*El Americano—*"

Another volley of shots behind cut off the rest. Someone yelled outside. The tombes had ceased now.

"Quauhtl," said Montezuma composedly. Chisos Owens bowed, called something

to the guards by the throne as he whirled and ran toward the hallway from which the second guard had come, pulling the Bisley he wore. Four of the techutli followed him from the squad by the dais, and Elgera heard the echo of their feet down the corridor, and then a sporadic series of shots. She looked around swiftly.

"You are afraid, *señorita*?" said Montezuma. "They will never reach me. I am invincible. I am immortal."

"Are you?" said Elder Fayette, stepping through the doorway to the right of the throne.

There were only two guards left by the throne; they turned, jerking Henriess around. The sound of Fayette's six-gun rocked the room. The first guard went down without firing. The second got a bullet out but it went into the floor as he fell forward on his face. The hammer snapped on Fayette's gun as he pulled the trigger a third time. He tossed the weapon aside, still coming forward, stepping across the body of the guard who had first come from that doorway. He didn't seem to see Elgera. His burning eyes were fixed on Montezuma. From outside there was another rattle of shots.

"That's Abilene," said Fayette through his teeth. "He came up one stairway. I took the other. I guess he won't get by Chisos, will he? That's why we split up. I knew one of us would have to meet Chisos, and I knew that one wouldn't get through. The other one reached you though, didn't he, Montezuma?"

Montezuma rose, nostrils flaring like some wild stallion in a rage. Yet he seemed held there for that moment by the sight of that big, inexorable man, coming steadily toward him in a heavy, unhurried walk. Elgera could understand that. Few others would have gotten this far. Perhaps only one other. The one Fayette had recognized for being that kind. Chisos Owens.

FAYETTE took a step across the first guard he had shot, and stumbled, and Elgera realized he was wounded. But his voice was steady, and he kept going toward Montezuma.

"Did you think you could play the game both ways to the middle, like Ortega does?" he said heavily. "Let me get those guns

for you and then wipe out my spread? Did you think that would finish me like it did the others? I won't be finished till I get you, Montezuma. I don't care much what happens after that. Nobody's crossed me yet and stayed around to tell about it. You won't be the first. I've come to get you."

Montezuma leaned forward, all his fanaticism suddenly bursting through his austerity with a hissing venom. "And did you think I wouldn't wipe you out with all the other gauchupines in Texas. Oppressors. Tyrants. You are one of them, Fayette. You can't harm me—"

Fayette staggered and began to move forward faster, his voice gasping. "Go ahead, pull that hideout. Remember what I told you? You haven't got enough lead in that cutter to stop me before I get you. Go ahead—"

His words were cut off by the blast of the first shot. Fayette grunted sickly, and bent over, and stepped across the body of the second techutli he had killed. The next shot thundered. Elgera saw Fayette jerk, and bend forward a little farther, still stumbling forward with his hands outstretched now in a blind, groping way. As the third shot filled the room, Elgera ran to the side of the throne, reaching for something beneath her shirt.

Montezuma bent forward for the last shot. His face twisted as he squeezed the trigger on his Krider derringer. It took Fayette square. With a terrible animal scream of pain, Fayette threw himself forward, his indomitable will carrying his heavy body two more stumbling paces to crash into Montezuma.

For a moment they struggled there, Fayette's head buried into Montezuma's chest, blocky hands clawing the feathered robe off. Montezuma took a step back and almost fell off the raised dais, trying to jerk free. Fayette smashed him in the face. Montezuma took another step, striving desperately to tear the relentless man off. Then the Indian quit struggling, and looked down at the head buried against his chest, and a strange look crossed his dark face. He reached up and pried Fayette's hand from around his neck as if he were releasing himself from something vile; the marks of the fingers showed white on his bronze skin. He pried Fayette's

other hand off the smooth muscle of his shoulder.

He took yet another step back, and let the dead man fall to the floor.

Chisos Owens came through the curtain of the front hall. "We got Abilene. Fayette—"

He stopped as he saw Fayette, and his eyes raised to Montezuma, and they widened as they saw *Señorita* Scorpion.

"This is a nopal thorn I have pressed against your back," the girl told Montezuma. "It's been soaked a year in the venom of a hundred diamondbacks. An old woman down by the Pecos gave it to me. She didn't think you were immortal. Make the wrong move and we'll find out."

While he was struggling with Fayette, Elgera had gotten around behind Montezuma. She stood with one hand caught in the golden belt around his muscular middle, the other pressing the sharp point of the nopal thorn into his flesh. She felt the slow stiffening of his tremendous body.

"Tlazteotl, he hissed.

"What's that?" she said.

"Tlazteotle," Chisos Owens answered. "Queen of witches!"

II

*The Book of Fate was begun
In the sacred Temple of War
It ends in the House of the Sun
Read Tonalamente no more*

SMALL FIRES burned in stone braziers along the hall, and their sibilant hiss haunted the ghostly corridor, and the gleaming walls seemed to eddy and writhe with a thousand flickering serpents of garish red shadow-light thrown upon them by the flames. Chisos Owens led, glancing back over his shoulder with that confused look on his face. He was completely under Montezuma's domination, but he knew a wrong move from him would mean his lord's death. Elgera still walked behind the Indian, one hand in his belt, the other pressing the poison thorn against his back.

It was the same corridor into which Ortega had been taken by the two guards, and its gradual decline was leading them down into the bowels of the pyramid. Elgera spoke thinly.

"This had better take us to Hagar."

"We are going to the sacred fire-chambers," said Montezuma, having recovered some of his composure again. "The kiva. These temples were erected many centuries ago by a branch of the Aztecs who migrated this far north. I was born of Yaqui parents in the Sierra Madres, and discovered these ruins when I was a young man. I knew then that it didn't matter who my parents had been. In Tonalamente, it is decreed that Montezuma should be reincarnated, and find his old gods in the ancient city north of Tenochtitlan, which you know as Mexico. You cannot desecrate those gods, *Señorita*. You are a fool to try.

The corridor opened abruptly into a square room with a statue of Quetzalcoatl in the center. Lashed to the sacrificial altar of jasper at the idol's feet was Luis Ortega, writhing and panting, his face bathed in sweat. There was a guard on either side of him, and an old, bearded nualli in a long black robe.

"Tlatoani Montezuma," quavered the ancient medicine man, bowing low, and then he seemed to see the strained expression in Montezuma's face, and how close Elgera stood to the Indian. A guard made a jerky motion with his gun.

"Tell them how it is," snapped Elgera. "Tell them to drop their hardware and go ahead of us."

Montezuma obeyed, and the guards slowly let their Henries clatter to the floor, watching Montezuma with puzzled eyes. Ortega's babbling voice rose shrilly.

"*Señorita*, en el nombre de Dios, free me. They are going to sacrifice me to the Serpent-God. They are going to cut my heart out with a macapan."

For a moment she was moved to pity. Then she remembered what Ortega was, and she realized if she let go of Montezuma to cut the Spaniard loose, it would be her last mistake. Her face hardened. She shoved Montezuma on, the guards and the old man preceding them into the hall on the other side.

"*Madre de Dios*," screamed Ortega, writhing on the altar. "*Señorita*. Cut me loose. *Señorita*. Dios, Dios. . ."

His screams broke into a crazed sobbing, and then even that faded and died behind them, and the only sound was the serpentine hiss and snap of the small fires lighting

the way. Finally, from ahead, Elgera heard the first dim, monotonous chanting.

"They are inculcating the unbeliever Hagar into peyote," said Montezuma hollowly. "In two days he will no longer doubt our gods. He will be a techutli as great as Quauhtl, and with two men like that I can rule the world if I choose."

They twisted and turned through the maze of corridors that honeycombed the great pyramid, the strange chanting becoming louder. Then, from ahead, Elgera saw the outline of yellow light around a curtained doorway. The guards before the portal bowed to Montezuma till their parrot plumes scraped the ochred floor.

"Tell them to go inside ahead of you," said Elgera. "And no slips."

She felt the magnificent muscles of his back tense against her knuckles as he took a breath before he spoke. The guards bowed again, swept aside the curtain. Chisos followed them in, then the bearded nualli. Elgera shoved Montezuma after them.

THE FIRST MAN she saw was Johnny Hagar, the manacles on his wrists and ankles attached to chains socketed in the floor, spread-eagling him on the cold cement. His only garment was the gilt-edged maxtli, clinging wet with perspiration to his flat belly and lean shanks. His dark eyes had a strange glaze, but there was recognition in them as he jerked his head to one side and saw her.

"Elgera!" he gasped.

"Oh," said one of the men who had been bending over him, and straightened. "Elgera."

"Don't do it, Lobos," snapped the girl. "You'll be killing Montezuma."

Lobos Delcazar stopped his dark fingers before they touched the ivory butts of Johnny Hagar's Peacemakers. The ceremonial drummers at one side of the room sat with their hands suspended over the skin tombes. Montezuma drew himself up, and his hands were around in front of him. Elgera tightened her grip in his golden belt.

"Unlock Hagar, Lobos," she said. "The rest of you move over to the wall. You, too, Chisos."

"Chisos?" said the big man. "I am Quauhtl."

The guards moved slowly to the wall, smoke from the blazing fires shredding across in front of them and hiding their tense faces for a moment. Lobos unlocked the manacles, and Hagar had trouble rising. He put his hand to his head, shook it dazedly. He almost fell when he reached out to unbuckle the cartridge belts of his Peacemakers from around Lobos' red sash. Elgera sensed the movement of Montezuma's hands, hidden from her in front of his body.

"What are you doing?" she snapped. "Stop it."

The first shouts came from outside, and the sound of running feet. She had expected pursuit as soon as someone found their emperor gone from the audience chamber, and all those dead guards there. She couldn't help the turn of her head toward the sound.

Montezuma took that moment to lunge away from her. She yanked backward on his belt, throwing her whole weight against it. She crashed on back to the wall, belt flapping free in her hands. The sudden release caused Montezuma to stagger forward and almost go on his face. He had unbuckled the belt.

One of the guards yelled and knocked the fire out of the brazier, throwing the small kiva into semi-darkness. A tombe thumped hollowly as one of the drummers upset it, scrambling erect and jumping across the other fire. Elgera had made Chisos give her his Bisley upstairs. She wrenched the .44 from her waistband, struggling away from the wall.

"Get out the door," shouted Hagar.

His guns boomed and someone screamed. The body must have fallen into the other fire, for there was a hissing sound, and the room was plunged into intense darkness. The Peacemakers boomed again, and a man went through the door, taking the curtain with him, and fell in the hallway outside.

A man crashed into Elgera, and she struck viciously. He grunted and went down. Hagar's guns drowned the other sounds after that, racketing hideously. Then she was caught by the elbow, and the sheriff's voice was harsh in her ear.

"Out the door, I told you—"

"Think I'd leave you," she cried, and was carried across the body in the doorway by

Hagar's rush. He yanked her down the corridor in the opposite direction from which she had come, for there were other guards running toward them down there. A man ran out of the door, shouting. It was Montezuma. Hagar pulled her around a corner, and they were plunged into the darkness of an unlit hall.

"Chisos," she panted. "We can't leave him."

"**W**HAT could you do with him?" said Hagar, running beside her. "He's filled with peyote. It's sort of a dope, like marijuana. Regular religion with the Indians for centuries. Takes about five days to get you completely. I've only had two days of it but I'm in a daze already. Crazy with it. Feel like I'm drunk or swimming or something."

"How did they get you to take it in the first place? How did they get Chisos to take it?"

"Ramon Delcazar spent the night at Chisos' spread," said Hagar. "Must've mixed peyote beans in with his coffee, like they did with me. Can't tell the difference. I thought I was drinking coffee till it was too late. Devotees of the stuff eat the beans raw, like Lobos. In that fire-chamber they force it down you in liquid form. Can't keep your mouth closed, tied down like that. They hold your nose so you have to drink it or choke to death."

"Isn't there any hope?" she said.

"For Chisos?" he panted. "Yeah. If we could get to him there would be. The effect of the beans eaten raw is milder and lasts only a few hours. But these nualli mix something they call teopatl in with the liquid peyote, made from the roots of vinigrilla or something. Takes a man's soul, Elgera. Robs him of any will of his own. Makes him forget everything. It lasts about a month. At the end of that time they have to take him back to the kiva and dope him up again for five days. Chisos has been out about a month, from what Lobos told me. He must be about ready to come out of the haze. If we could only get him to recognize us, to remember who he really is. . . ."

They must have been running through a section of the pyramid not yet rebuilt by Montezuma's slaves; the hall was littered

with rubble, and Elgera kept stumbling in the utter darkness. From behind, the shouts and other sounds of pursuit drowned her gasp as she tripped over a rock and fell flat. She could hear Hagar running on ahead. Then he stopped, and his voice sounded muffled.

"Elgera?"

"Here," she said, standing up and groping her way down the wall. She reached a corner. Was that why his voice had sounded muffled? Light glowed dimly behind her as the first man appeared, carrying a torch. Behind him were others, stumbling and tripping across the debris.

"Elgera," called Hagar sharply.

It seemed to come from ahead. She fumbled around the corner, and it was dark again, and she ran forward, feeling her way. She was quite far down the hall when she saw the man with the torch pass its end and go on down the other corridor, and the others follow him. The silence that fell after they were by struck at her ominously. She drew a sharp breath to call.

"Hagar?"

There was no answer. She went back the way she had come, and turned out into the other corridor in the pitch blackness. Driven by a growing panic that she couldn't down, she began to run, and the sound of her footsteps rolled down the hall ahead of her, and came back multiplied, and engulfed her with a thousand sibilant echoes, like the hollow shuckles of some malignant giant.

She ran blindly through the maze of corridors, stumbling, falling, afraid to call Hagar now for fear the others would hear her, Bisley clutched in a palm sticky with cold sweat. Then she began to see faint light from ahead, and finally burst through one of the silver-embroidered curtains into a square room where a man lay bound on a block of jasper in front of the idol of Quetzalcoatl.

"Señorita," moaned Luis Ortega weakly. "Please. I beg of you. Mercy. Cut me loose."

SHE SAGGED against the wall, brushing damp hair back off her forehead, unable to believe she had found her way back here. Then, still gasping from the run, she tore the macapan out of the idol's

hand and sawed the rawhide lashings binding Ortega. He rolled off and lay on the floor a moment, panting. His gold-handled cane and blue cape were beside the statue. He got to his hands and knees and crawled to them, mumbling dazedly; then he rose and turned toward Elgera, eyes furtive.

"I know who you are now," he panted. "*Si. Señorita* Douglas. Montezuma didn't realize what he was doing when he crossed your trail, did he? *Pues*, neither did I. But it was I who helped you. Remember? *Si*, twice I helped you. I will help you again, *señorita*, and this time I won't ask a peso for my services. You can have them gratis."

He began to rub his forefinger with his thumb, and came on toward her, his voice growing stronger, more oily. She took a step backward, watching his face.

"There are secret doors leading out onto each terrace," he said. "*Si*, we will not have to go back through the throne room. I think we are about finished here anyway, eh? It was a loco idea of Montezuma's anyway. I don't think he could have ruled Tejas, even with Chisos Owens. There will be other empires to rule. We could do a lot together, you and I . . ."

She took another step back, and tripped on the altar. While she was off-balance like that, she saw him whip the blade from his cane, and lunge.

"*Diguello!*" He screamed Santa Anna's cry of no quarter.

She threw herself on back over the altar. Ortega's blade flashed through the soft collar of her shirt. She twisted as she fell, catching the sword for that moment. As she struggled to rise, Ortega lunged backward, trying to tear his steel free. She gained her hands and knees and threw herself at him from there. Her weight carried him back against the far wall. She heard the blade tear from her shirt.

"*Bruja*," gasped Ortega, whipping the sword free. "Witch—"

She caught the blade in her bare hands, twisting it sideways away from her as he struck. It went past her body, and he tried to pull it back again. Steel sliced through her fingers with searing pain, covering them with blood. Ortega's whiplash body was like a writhing snake beneath her.

She rose on one knee and came down with her other in his belly. He gasped and collapsed back against the stone, face twisted. She caught the sword again; his grip on it was relaxed for that moment, and she tore it free, twisting it to grasp the gold-encrusted hilt in a bloody fist. She was straddling him like that with the sword turned, when he gathered himself and lunged blindly up beneath her. She didn't even see the blade go in. She only heard him gasp.

"Madre de Dios . . ."

He sagged back against the lime-coated stones. She let go of the sword and rose, looking dazedly down at the dead man. Suddenly she turned and picked up the gun she had dropped and ran across the room to the hall leading above. Secret doors? How could she find them? She burst through a curtained aperture into the next corridor, running on an upward slant. Her movements were sluggish and painful. She was breathing in short, agonizing gasps. She stumbled through another curtained doorway, and came abruptly to a halt, realizing too late that it had led her into the throne room.

Guards were running back and forth across the great hall, and two slaves were carrying one of the men Fayette had shot out the door on the other side. A squad of techutli was drawn up in front of the dais, and half a dozen robed old men were fluttering around Montezuma. He was giving an order to a runner, and from the height of his throne, was the first to see Elgera. He stood up suddenly, and the direction of his glance caused the others to look that way. Chisos Owens turned toward Elgera where he stood at one side of the dais.

"It is the woman, Quauhtli," thundered Montezuma. "Kill her!"

JOHNNY HAGAR'S hands were bleeding from feeling his way along the jagged, broken surface of the walls. He didn't know how long ago he had lost Elgera. He was lost, now. He had reached a dead-end, and he was lost. He stumbled over the rubble-strewn floor, trying to find the corner of the hall to get his bearings. His breathing sounded harsh in the eerie silence; his feet made small, scraping sounds across the stone.

Once he felt himself swaying, and knew that was the peyote in him, and another time he was startled by his own drunken giggle. Then his bloody fingers slipped into a deep crack above his head.

"A quanto se vende?" said someone in Spanish, and it sounded as if it came from the wall itself.

Suddenly the stone heaved outward, throwing him backward, and the next voice burst on him loud and clear. "Shut your mouth or I'll show you what it will get us. If we don't find them, Montezuma will have our heads—"

The man stopped, and stood there in the opening left by the huge rock that had swung inward on a pivot. He was silhouetted by the smoky red light of a torch held by a techutli behind him. Hagar had been smashed back against the opposite wall, and was too dazed to go for his guns in that first moment when there might have been a chance, and now he didn't go for them, because he saw how it was.

"Hello, Ramon," he said, and took a step away from the wall to get his elbows free for when it came. "I guess having your spread wiped out didn't hit you as hard as it might. Or did you burn it yourself to make everything look right?"

Ramon Delcazar had changed his white pants and shirt for a feathered cloak, but he still packed his black-buttet forty-fives belted around his gilt-edged maxtli, and he shoved the cloak back, and kept his hands far enough above his guns, because he saw how it was, too.

"Si," he said, moving carefully in through the door. "I burned my spread. It would have looked funny if mine was spared when all the others were raided, wouldn't it?"

"Give me some elbow room, cousin," said Lobos Delcazar, and swaggered in behind Ramon, and he, too, saw that whoever made the first move now would start the thing, and he kept the curl of his fingers off the gold-chased butt of the Colt he had strapped back on. "It looks like I'll get those Peacemakers after all."

"We'll toss for them," said Ramon.

The techutli behind Lobos stuck his torch into a brazier on the wall. There were two others following him, carrying Henries, but up to now the two cousins had filled the narrow doorway and blocked

Hagar off from the guards, and the techutli were waiting for them to start it.

The echoes of Ramon's words diminished down the corridor and died reluctantly, and then the only sound was the harsh scrape of feet across the stone and the almost inaudible sibilation of the men's breathing, and the scrape of feet stopped, and it was only the breathing, and then Hagar took a last breath and held it, and Lobos did the same, the way an experienced gunman will when he senses the moment at hand, and Ramon, and the utter silence held them all there for that last instant with the red light flickering across their strained faces and catching the waiting glitter of their eyes.

"*Carajo!*" shouted Lobos, and started it.

Hagar was still grinning when his guns bellowed. Lobos staggered backward and his Colt went off at the roof, and the techutli jumped away from his body as it fell in their midst. Ramon spun up against the wall with a scream, dropping one of his forty-fives, desperately trying to throw down with the other one to hit Hagar as his hammer dropped.

The techutlis burst through the door over Lobos' body, Henriess bellowing. With the first .56 slug knocking him backward, Hagar thumbed out two more shots. Ramon grunted and dropped his other gun and doubled over. A guard stumbled and went to his knees, and then his face, and slid almost to Hagar's feet before he stopped.

"Come on, you damned *barrachones*," brayed Hagar, laughing crazily. "Come on, come on, come on . . ."

Drunk on peyote, inflamed with the roar of battle, he swayed there in that last moment, screaming at them, Peacemakers filling the hall with an unearthly racket as they bucked up and down in his bloody hands. The last two techutlis threw themselves on him with demented howls, shooting their Henriess from the waist. Hagar thumbed his right hand gun, and his left, and saw one man jerk to both bullets, and then another Henry slug caught the sheriff, and the man he had shot came hurtling on into him, and Hagar crashed to the floor beneath the body.

He struck the stones with his right hand gun pinned between his belly and the techutli's. He tore his left hand weapon free,

firing at the last man from where he lay on his back beneath the dying techutli. It was all a haze of a twisted screaming face and the stabbing flame of a levered Henry blinding him and the rocking bellow of his own Peacemaker deafening him and the jarring pain of Henry lead tearing through the body above him and driving on down into his own.

"**KILL HER!**" The order still rang in Chisos Owen's ears. He stood there, looking at the girl, aware that the throne room had become silent, that all the techutli were waiting for him to carry out Montezuma's order. But there was something in the girl's eyes. She held out her hand.

"Chisos," she said faintly. "Chisos . . ."

"*Quauhtli!*" roared Montezuma. "I command you. Kill her!"

Chisos? She kept calling him that. He couldn't take his eyes away from hers. They were deep blue, and he seemed to be sinking into them, and suddenly he could remember the other name. Chisos Owens. With the single memory, others began to come, crowding in, flooding his brain. Names he had tried to recall without success, people he had remembered only as nebulous memories that would never quite come through the fog of peyote. Alpine. Johnny Hagar. Ramon Delcazar. The Santiago. *Señorita* Scorpion. Yes, Elgera Douglas. He had loved her. Why did this girl bring back those memories? And what was he doing here in this great hall, with all these strange men in feathered cloaks around him, and that wild-eyed loco standing on some kind of a throne? Elgera Douglas?

"*Quauhtli,*" thundered Montezuma. "I command you—"

With an animal roar of rage, Chisos Owens whirled and threw himself toward the throne. The surprised guards didn't try to stop him till he was almost there. He crashed through their ranks like a bull through bee brush.

Without stopping or slowing down or even seeming to see the men who had tried to get in his way, he caught the first one's rifle, and using it as a lever, spun him away into the others. He smashed through two more farther on, knocking them to either side. He caught a fourth with a backhand

swing that sent him rolling across the floor.

Elgera Douglas? He had loved her. And this Montezuma had sent him out to kill her. He remembered it now.

"Quauhtl—"

Chisos crashed into Montezuma before he had finished shouting, huge frame knocking the Indian off the throne. They struck the floor rolling over and over like a pair of fighting cats. Montezuma got his hands and knees beneath him finally, and tried to rise.

Chisos slugged him behind the neck with a fist that would have killed another man. Montezuma quivered, and set himself, and heaved upward. Chisos struck him again, riding his gigantic torso. Montezuma took that one, too, and kept on rising, the muscles in his legs standing out in great trembling ridges.

He shot one of his legs out suddenly, catching Chisos behind the knees. Chisos staggered backward to keep from falling; he hung onto Montezuma and the two of them went stumbling and lurching out through the doorway that led to the terrace, both trying vainly to keep erect. Chisos' feathered robe caught on the angle of the opening, tearing from his great shoulders. Then they went down again, and rolled on across the terrace, fighting, grunting, slugging. Chisos sensed they were coming to the edge, and sprawled out to stop their momentum.

There was a terrible animal vitality in Montezuma's writhing, swelling, surging body. Chisos got one arm hooked around the Indian's neck and struck him again and again, and any one of them would have finished it with an ordinary man, and Montezuma's huge frame shook to each one, and he grunted sickly, and grimly fought to rise again.

SUDDENLY he shifted his weight and caught Chisos' wrist. Levered away from the man, Chisos couldn't hang on with his other arm around Montezuma's neck. The Indian released the arm and jumped up and backward. Chisos rolled like a cat, and was on his feet when the Indian threw himself in again.

The two men met with a fleshy, slapping sound there on the very edge of the terrace,

bathed in the blood-red light of the last afternoon sun. Montezuma's magnificent torso was wet with perspiration and the straining muscles writhed beneath the smooth bronze skin like fat snakes. Raging with peyote, Chisos fought like some savage animal, snarling and roaring, great calves knotting and rippling as he braced his feet wide on the ochred stone. They were locked inextricably together on the edge of the terrace, and a single wrong move from either man would have sent them hurtling over the edge. It was a contest of sheer brute strength, with each man straining desperately to turn the other one outward and force him off. Finally Montezuma brought his greater height and weight to bear, levering Chisos around with his back to the empty space that reeled below them. Chisos could hear the strange sigh that rose from the multitude of slaves and workers gathered in the courtyards below.

Slowly, inexorably, Montezuma was forcing him to yield, bending him outward, backward, downward. The Indian's right arm was locked around the small of Chisos' back, and his other hand was in Chisos' face, shoving relentlessly. Chisos had his forearm around Montezuma's neck, and he could feel the man's muscles swell and bulge, and his grip there was gradually slipping. His ribs began to make popping sounds. Stabbing pain shot through his chest. He was bent like a bow, the only thing that held him from falling was his arm around Montezuma's neck. He could feel his wrist slipping across the slippery skin. Then, from far away, he heard the girl's faint call.

"Chisos. Chisos . . ."

He drew in a great last desperate breath. His lips flattened against his teeth stained black with cochineal. The muscles across his tremendous shoulders humped into a bulging, obstinate line. Montezuma gasped hot in his face, trying to force him on down. Face twisting with the effort, Chisos Owens began to straighten again.

Montezuma braced his feet anew and gripped Chisos tighter, trying to stop him. He threw his weight against Chisos. He strained to halt that huge, straightening frame. Chisos came on up.

In a last desperation, Montezuma shifted his feet farther back for more leverage.

With the Indian's right foot sliding back, Chisos surged on up and twisted sharply in Montezuma's grasp. He caught the Indian's arm and slipped under it, his chest slamming into Montezuma's hip. The Indian tried to throw his weight over on Chisos. It put him off-balance. With his own legs in front of Montezuma and the bulk of his torso bent down to one side, Chisos heaved. The Indian screamed as he went up and out and down, down, down.

Chisos fell to his hands and knees to keep from following Montezuma. Gasping and quivering there, he saw what had held the techultlis in a little knot just outside the door. Hagar must have found his way up from below; he sat against the wall, holding both guns in his lap, his face set in a bloody, grinning mask. Still on his hands and knees, Chisos turned to look over the edge.

A guard on the next level had run to the sprawled body of Montezuma. Another came up and they turned Montezuma over. One of them looked upward.

"*Es muerto,*" he said. "He is dead."

SUPPORTING the wounded Hagar between them, Chisos and Elgera moved through the great silent audience chamber, and down the hall, and out onto the terrace and down the steps. Abilene had taken these front stairs up, while Fayette had taken the rear. On the stairs between the third and fourth levels, they passed Abilene. He lay across the body of a guard he had killed. His Beale-Remington was gripped in one supple hand. A cigarette was in the other.

At each following level on the way down, two guards lay dead where Abilene had passed going up. Elgera and Chisos half-carried Hagar through the silent, stunned crowd, still staring wide-eyed up to that ledge where Montezuma lay. The whole incredible edifice of the cult had been built on the premise that Montezuma himself was invincible and immortal. His death

utterly smashed that edifice. As if they were ghosts, Elgera and the two men moved out of the city. Once in a while someone turned to look blankly at them, and their mouth moved in some soundless word, and then they turned to look back at the House of the Sun.

Elgera was watching Chisos intently. He kept shaking his head, blinking his eyes.

"All those ranches I raided," he said, "all those people I fought. They were my friends. I tried to kill you. I burned your Santiago and ran off your herds. I—"

"No," she almost sobbed. "You didn't know what you were doing. You weren't responsible. Don't you think your friends will forgive you? I forgave you a long time ago."

"Lobos was the one who shot Elgera's uncle and brother," said Hagar. "And as for your real friends, Elgera's right, they'll forgive anything you did, Chisos, you know what had happened in the city; they still accepted Chisos as Quauhtl, their warlord, and got three horses at his order. They stood there a moment before mounting, looking back through Tlaloc's Door to the doomed city.

"With Montezuma dead, they'll all drift back to their own tribes," said Chisos dully. "It's hard to think that's all finished. Seem's like I never knew any other life."

They had to help Hagar on his horse, but he was grinning, and he looked at Elgera when he spoke. "Yeah, that's finished. But there are other things. I'm going to buy me a new white Stetson and a pair of Mexican spurs as big as the wheels on a Murphy wagon, and the first Saturday night after we get back, Elgera, you'll find me on your doorstep a-courting."

Chisos looked up, and it was the first time since she had found him here that *Señorita* Scorpion had seen him grin.

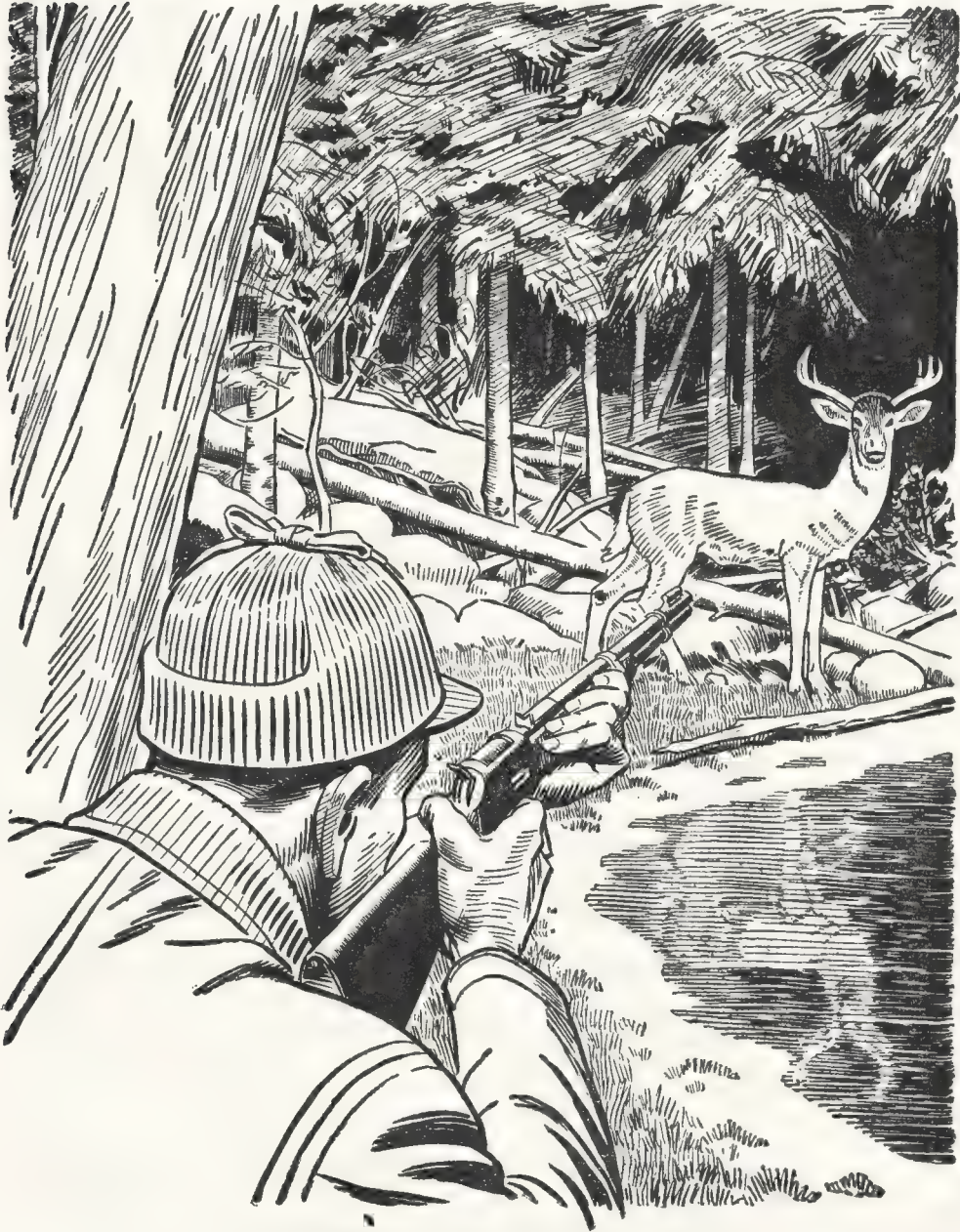
"You're wrong, Hagar," he said, "she'll find us on her doorstep a-courting."



MAVERICK SIRE

by Joe Austell Small

Being man of the family is tough enough, when you're eleven years old. But having to save your life by shooting your dad—well, young Ben Watson's growing up was going too fast.



For a moment the buck was silently poised.

BEN WATSON sat upright in his bed and said, "Pa, that damned wildcat's after the chickens again!"

Old Cal Watson stirred sleepily. Rusty

springs squeaked protestingly as he turned over and raised his upper body to a wobbly rest on his right elbow.

"Eh? What say, son?"

"I say, plague-gone-it, that damned wild-cat's after our chickens again! Come on!" The boy crawled out of bed.

"Hush that damned cussin'!" old Cal Watson came alive suddenly. "And wait for me!"

The old rancher's hands shook a little as he lit the smoky, crack-globed lantern. He held it in his left hand and gripped the old .45 Peacemaker firmly in his right. Cal Watson eased out the back door then and walked down the sagging back gallery steps. Loose boards rattled under the pressure of his bare feet.

"Stay clean back out of the way!" the old rancher ordered as they approached the big oak that formed a corner post of the tiny pole corral. "That old bobcat's a skin full o' pizen. He could claw a kid's belly open afore you had time to turn around!"

"Aw, pa!" the boy argued. "Lemme get a pop at him with yore old Gatlin' gun! I'll shoot his blasted liver out. I'll—"

"Be quiet, consarn it!" the old rancher swore. "An' stay back!"

The old Plymouth Rock hen with the bass voice was cackling wildly. Another kept up a continual squawk, as if she was already in the clutches of the midnight depredator. The old Rhode Island red rooster burst forth erratically with gusts of startled chicken talk.

Old Cal Watson saw it then—a dark form outlined against a blood red moon rising slowly in the east. The old rancher walked forward carefully. He hadn't forgotten the feel of those long, raking claws a wounded cat sunk in his head only last week. This time he'd make sure. He'd get a head shot.

The old rancher raised his smoking lantern to a level with his left shoulder and held it slightly to the back and away from him. Old Cal Watson felt a chill run up his backbone then. He could see the crouched form of the big bobcat and he knew the cat was looking at him—but there was no red glow from the animal's eyes!

"Hell, Ben!" the old rancher exclaimed. "That blasted cat's eyes won't shine. His head's turned this way all right. I've hunted bobcats for forty years and I never run up agin' nothin' like this afore!" His voice was uneasy.

The dark object moved then. Already

cat-shy and jumpy, old Cal Watson jerked slightly to the side. The move saved his life. There was a roar from the tree and a stab of yellow flame licked out at the old rancher. The lantern globe crumbled. Slivers of flying glass cut his neck, buried into his flannel nightshirt. Particles of the broken globe clinked hollowly as they struck the rocky ground.

Cal Watson dropped the globeless lantern, ducked to a quick side crouch, and shot twice at the black object in the old oak tree. There followed a muffled exclamation, a wheezing sigh and the object fell heavily to the ground. The oak limb, relieved of its heavy burden, shuttled up and down slowly. With startled squawks, wildly chattering hens left oak limbs slick from contact of countless roosting chickens' feet.

"Bring me a match, son!" old Cal Watson called back over his shoulder. He picked up the lantern then and thumped the dirt from its wick with his thumb and index finger. The boy didn't speak when he brought the match. The old rancher cupped the blaze in his hands carefully, then held it to the moist, blackened cloth. The smoking blaze flickered wildly and threatened to dance off the wick.

THE INERT black object that Cal Watson thought was dead suddenly came to life then. The old rancher grabbed his gun off the ground quickly. He had lain it down carelessly to light the lantern. He swung the heavy gun on a retreating black shadow and fired. The running figure dodged behind the corral fence, ran madly for the old sunflower field behind it. Cal Watson scrambled forward with an oath, climbed atop the pole fence. He got in one more shot as the moving shadow melted into the sunflower growth. The old rancher heard his bullet batting through the tall weeds with an angry whine.

Cal Watson complained, "Can't I shoot no more? 'At's two blasted wampus cats I've let get away from me in a week!" He was sure a big'un, too, wasn't he, Ben?"

"Damn right!" the boy's voice was a little off key. "Them suckers're gettin' smart these days, too, packin' guns that way!"

Cal Watson sat there on the pole fence. His shoulders slumped. "I'm sixty-five

years old, Ben," he said slowly. "And I'm a bigger fool than the day I was born! An old deer hunter like me knows better'n to take fallen game for dead. If he hadn't lost his gun in the fall, that damned bush-whacker could a' shot me an' you both while I was lightin' that blasted lantern!"

"He wasn't wantin' to do no more shootin' after them two slugs bit him," the boy said. "He was just wantin' to leave fast. It was one of Sam Black's men, uh coarse," the boy said. His lips were tight. "The lowdown, mangy sons-of—"

"Easy now!" the old rancher warned. He got down off the fence and walked over to where the man had fallen.

"That sneakin' Black devil heard about your cat trouble last week. He figured to drape a big bobcat skin over one of his men. Scrooched up on a limb he'd look somethin' like a wildcat. Then when you come out with a lantern shinin' in your face for him to shoot by, all he's got to do is blast yuh. Damned slick! The filthy sons—"

"Ben, yuh got to quit that cussin'!" the old rancher said.

"I done quit it, nearbouts, pa," the boy declared. "Gettin' better all the time. A man's got t' do a thing gradual, y'know."

The old rancher rose from his search then. He held a long barreled cap and ball revolver in his right hand. "You been whang-dangling the livin' daylights outta me wantin' a gun for goin' on two year now," the old man said. "Don't reckon that wildcat'll come back after his. Might as well be your'n."

"You mean it, pa!" the boy ran forward. "A gun o' my own?"

"Yeah," the old rancher spoke grimly. "If you ever have to, if you got to shoot to protect your own hide, shoot anybody but one man." Cal Watson sighed, turned and walked toward the house. "Just don't ever use it on Sam Black!"

THE DAYS that followed were hard on Cal Watson. There was a haunting fear in his heart. He kept within sight of the boy at all times. He taught the kid to be constantly aware of danger, like an old mossy-horned buck in the forest. They rode around irregularities in the trail where an ambush could be staged, came in off the range before dark, and the old rancher

was careful to see that no lamp burned inside the little ranch house at night.

Some of the precautions Cal Watson took seemed strange to the boy, but he asked few questions. Sam Black and his two henchmen had ridden into Great Oak Valley two weeks ago and told old Cal Watson to git. Sam Black wanted the Oak Leaf Spread. But Cal Watson wouldn't git. He didn't scare easy. The boy couldn't understand their talk. Sam Black accused Cal Watson of stealing his ranch. The old rancher said the Oak Leaf Spread was his by rights of homestead. Sam Black and his men settled down in the hills then and tried, by various methods, to force Cal Watson out. The wildcat affair was the first sign of violence. It showed just how desperate Sam Black was.

That was enough for the boy. This man and his henchmen wanted the Oak Leaf. Ben Watson and his pa had no intentions of pulling stakes because they were threatened by three saddle hoodlums. The gang had persisted, got rough. So Sam Black and his men were enemies of theirs and were to be treated as such. But the hardest thing for Ben Watson to understand about the whole thing was why had his pa said not ever use that gun on Sam Black?

The dread in old Cal Watson's heart grew as the days passed and Sam Black remained quiet. That man wanted the Oak Leaf. He wanted it bad. The great land boom which had died out eight years ago was coming back now with a wild surge. Great Oak Valley would be overrun with settlers. For thirty miles down Black Jack Creek, little spreads would spring up. And they'd need water, Black Jack Springs water. The springs surged from a bluff on Oak Leaf soil. For two miles the little creek ran through narrow Black Jack Basin. If a man like Sam Black owned the Oak Leaf Spread, he could dam up the lower end of Black Jack Basin, create a miniature lake. It would just about take up what flow Sam Black couldn't clog up at the spring site itself.

He could force the small ranchers that must depend on Black Jack Creek for water supply during the dry season, to meet his terms. Sam Black would charge them for the water that flowed from his springs. And his fee would be heavy.

The old rancher's mind was dark. Things were shaping up now, shaping up for the final test. And this time Cal Watson knew that when Sam Black picked up the deck, the cards he dealt would be for the Sugar game.

THE OLD hound's ringing notes came clear through the late afternoon air. He wasn't running or baying, the dog was trailing something. The trail was getting hotter, too, because the hound's bugling was eager now and more often.

"He's trailin' a deer, pa!" Ben Watson sat his little palomino and turned an ear to the sound. "We ain't et venison in a good while."

Old Cal Watson felt the blood surge through his veins. He'd hunted deer all his life and still, whenever a hunt was in prospect, there was that light feeling in his stomach, those wrinkles running up the old backbone.

"Some stray hound bounced one outta the marsh," Cal Watson tried to keep the eagerness from his voice. "We'll mosey on over to Willow Crossing for a stand. Pears like he's headed that way." In his mind the old rancher thought: *A little deer hunting might do us good. We both've had our nerves on edge for days.*

"Will 'uh let me shoot 'im, pa? You said yourself that I'm as good with that old carbine as you. Hell, I ain't shot at a deer in a month!" The boy was eager.

Cal Watson touched spurs to his roan and called back over his shoulder, "I'll let you shoot him if you'll watch that talkin' of yours for one whole day startin' now. Not an out-of-the-way word for twenty-four hours, d'you hear? I don't aim to have you grow up just a common cussin' scallawag. Hell! It ain't right for a 'leven-year-old kid to talk like that!"

"I'll watch 'er, pa!" Ben Watson promised.

Willow Crossing was on Black Jack Creek, a mile down from the springs. The man and boy left their horses in a small clearing up the creek and took their stand in a tight clump of yuapon brush. The hound's bugling became louder. The boy was tense.

A small herd of old Cal's yearlings came into view then on the opposite creek bank.

They were heading for the old watering hole at the lower end of the crossing.

"Gawd'o— I mean, look yonder, pa! Them cattle'll plumb scare th' deer off! He'll think there's somebody drivin' em!"

"Turn your head around easy and look down the trail where yer supposed to be lookin'!" old Cal Watson spoke in a whisper. The boy tensed, turned slowly.

"Shore a little'un, ain't he, pa?" The boy's voice was low, excited.

"Late crop," the old rancher said. "Look at the little devil tremble. He's tired out and scared half to death! He hears the cattle and don't know what to do."

The little spike hesitated, turned around in the trail, started out into the woods, whipped back and glanced uneasily down his back trail. Suddenly he tensed to bolt, then relaxed as a great buck emerged from the thick foliage.

"The Black Horn Buck!" Cal Watson exclaimed. "I been trying to outsmart that old rounder for years! Hold your fire, son, 'till you get a dead shot!"

The kid's eyes bulged. He was quiet for he didn't trust his voice.

THE GREAT buck nosed the weary spike quickly, then walked down the trail toward the crossing. He looked back, stamped his front feet impatiently. It was his signal for the young buck to follow. The spike hesitated, looked nervously down his back trail and followed meekly.

The old Black Horn Buck came down the trail in stately tread. He paused within sight of the cattle, looked them over quickly, tested the air carefully, then proceeded.

"He's up to something," the old rancher said. "Let's wait and see."

Cautiously the old buck approached the cattle, his nostrils working testily, every muscle alert. The man smell was strong. Old Cal and Ben had branded some of the yearling stock just yesterday.

Cal Watson opened his mouth and sucked in a little breath of surprise then. The old buck was walking out into the creek, mingling freely with the cattle, even rubbing up against their wet sides. He made several circles among them, with the young spike following. Then the great buck walked down the shallow stream, careful to remain within the water itself. He dis-

appeared around a bend then, the spike still following.

"Well, damn my old rusty hide!" Cal Watson exclaimed. "In my whole life I never saw a thing like that before! That blasted buck prob'ly saved the little spike's life! He mixed their trails up with them cattle and then walked out of sight in the water where he'll leave no scent!"

The old hound came down the trail then with an eager cry. He reached the milling cattle and stopped. The dog was puzzled. He tried to follow the trail on through, snorted and gave it up. The dog circled then, trying to cut scent on the other side. He worked up and down the creek on both sides, whined, and lay down in the cool water. He was completely stumped.

Young Ben Watson had sat there through it all in a sort of daze. The old rancher had taught him to appreciate wildlife. Even now he was a woodsman second only to old Cal Watson. The two walked out of their hiding spot then.

"Pa," the boy said. "I just couldn't shoot old Black Horn. He didn't *have* to help that little spike out."

"I'm glad you didn't," old Cal Watson smiled. "It would a'been takin' unfair advantage—sorta like catchin' him in a trap."

"A trap is right," a voice came from behind. "And a damned good one! Better put up your hands now!"

SAM BLACK rode around in front of the man and boy, a gun in his right hand and a smile on his face. "You been too damned careful here lately!" he said. "But I thought the promise of a little deer huntin' would bring you out!"

Sam Black was a big man and tall. His lips were thick, so that when he talked they moved only slightly. His belly hung out over a heavy belt like rising yeast dough swelling out from a biscuit pan. His face was red, his clothes rough. When the man laughed it sounded like there were loose stones in his belly.

"You shore believe in givin' a man a chance!" Cal Watson said, an ironic smile on his lips. "Don't see how you ever know anybody by their face, Sam, you work behind their backs so much!"

"Makin' jokes to keep up your spunk, eh, Cal?" the big man sneered. "Wal, yuh

gonna need them, old boy. You gonna need lots o' funny things to laugh at afore we get through with you! Let's head for Black Jack Springs, boys," he addressed the two men still behind old Cal and the boy. "I'm thirsty."

Sam Black disarmed his captives but he didn't think it necessary to bind their wrists. He rode behind, gun held ready for a possible break attempt, a gloating smile on his face. Red Dozier rode ahead, Slawson behind and slightly to the side.

Cal Watson read the boy's face. The little fellow was thinking about a break, looking hopefully at the old man for some signs of encouragement. Cal Watson shook his head slowly. The way things stood now, it would be suicide.

When they reached the springs, Tush Slawson slid painfully out of his saddle. He held a gun in his left hand. His right arm and side were bandaged and stiff. Hatred burned from the man's eyes.

"Get down!" he said simply.

Old Cal Watson dismounted easily. He looked at Tush and a slow smile pulled at the corners of his mouth. "Then two front teeth stickin' out your mouth like that," he said in a pseudo-friendly tone, "they shore remind me of a big wampus cat lyin' on a limb—"

The tall, sloe-eyed man cursed bitterly. He raised the big .44 and stepped forward.

"Uh, uh!" Sam Black warned. "We want him to be feelin' in fettle for our little joke!" The big man let out a short, hollow laugh. He turned to Cal Watson. "Tush there helped me plan out our 'speriment. You see," he smiled widely, "you think so damned much of these springs o' yours, we gonna see that you hang 'round'um more! The boys here knocked out both ends of an old whiskey barrel. We'll sink it in that little spring over there to the right. Then we'll wad you up and tie you down in it and the water'll rise slow and refreshin'. When it gets up to your nose, I'm bettin' you have lung trouble shor'n hell!" He laughed deep down. His two men grunted slightly, a polite echo of their leader's hilarity.

Cal Watson looked at the red, bloodshot eyes of the man standing there before him. They were not the eyes of a human. They reminded old Cal more of a hungry panther's burning orbs. He noted the cruel

slant of the big man's mouth, the hollow puff of his red cheeks. The old rancher looked and a shudder shook his slender frame. Cal Watson knew he was looking into the eyes of a greedy sadist, a man who takes what he wants by force and enjoys seeing men die in order to gorge his own selfish desire.

Sam Black walked over and drank deeply from the little spring. "Better get a drink now, men," he said with a chuckle. "Water might not be fit to sup from now on!"

Ben Watson could stand no more. His tense nerves snapped. "You big-bellied rat!" he screamed, lunging at Sam Black. "I'll tear out yore filthy heart. I'll—"

THE BIG MAN stepped aside deftly. He hit the boy behind his right ear with the back of a powerful hand. Ben Watson fell like a clubbed calf. But he didn't stay down long. The boy was up again, cursing, sinking small fists into the fat belly, kicking the big man's shins. His straight, sandy hair was flying wildly. His face was white now, so that the freckles stood out like black specks on a bed sheet. The boy's eyes were wild with uncontrollable fury.

Old Cal Watson had run forward when the boy first made his play. But Sam Black's two henchmen had dived in and now held the old rancher firmly, arms pinned behind him. Grey streaked hair hanging down in a weather-worn face, the old man looked on, misery in his mealy blue eyes.

Sam Black hit the boy full in the face with a great, hairy fist then; hit him just hard enough to knock the kid flat. Then the big man waded in, rough boots flaying. He kicked Ben Watson hard in the stomach. The boy doubled up in pain, gasping for breath. The big man brought his heavy foot up then, sent it crashing down on the boy's side. Severe pain straightened the little fellow out. Sam Black kicked him in the stomach again, then proceeded to stomp the squirming body. The big man's face was a mask of black, livid fury.

Sam Black straightened up when the boy stopped struggling. A trickle of red ran out the kid's mouth. The hot anger left Sam Black's face then. The big man pulled himself together, hitched up a sagging belt. "Damned kid's poison as lizard

spit!" he said. "Maybe he'll be quiet awhile now!"

"Sam," old Cal Watson said. His eyes were black with misery, his voice unsteady. "If you've killed that boy, I'll plant a bullet in your heart if I have to do it in hell! I'll tear that black, filthy heart out of your body!"

"You better get started then!" Sam Black said. He slid the long-barreled .45 from his holster and held it on the old rancher's stomach. "You haven't got long! Boys, sink that barrel. Let's start the show!"

Tush Slawson worked with a grim smile on his surly face. Red Dozier was expressionless save for the hard glint in his eyes. He always looked at a man like he was picking out a spot in which to place his next bullet. Sam Black had the type of men he needed for his business all right.

The men dug a round hole into the spring itself. They made it a foot deep and wide enough to accommodate the barrel. They sunk it in the shallow hole and packed dirt around it carefully.

When the job was finished, they did not hesitate. Red Dozier walked over to old Cal Watson and started to bind his wrists. The old rancher made his play then. But Sam Black had looked for just such a break. He was ready. A quick rap on the head with the long-gun barrel and Cal Watson relaxed, slumped to the ground. Red Dozier didn't change expressions. He bound the old rancher's wrists and tied a rope securely around them. He doubled up the old man's legs then and stuffed him down in the barrel. Tush Slawson looked on with a surly grin. Water was already welling up slowly within the barrel, seeping out the dried seams. This was the smallest spring of the six that formed Black Jack Springs. It would take time for the flow to well up inside the barrel and drown old Cal Watson. And if the old man wouldn't meet his terms, Sam Black aimed to enjoy that time.

Red Dozier reached down inside the barrel then and stuffed the rope that bound old Cal Watson's wrists under the seepy slush. He dug down into the soft dirt outside the barrel and brought out the muddy rope. Bringing the wet hemp over to the old rancher's bound wrists. Then, and back into the barrel, he tied it securely

with the help of a stove-up Tush Slawson, he rolled two rocks and leaned them up on opposite sides of the barrel. This would hold it steady and the rope tied to Cal Watson's wrists would keep him down in the death chamber just low enough so that when water came out over the top, it would be an inch deep over the highest elevation that the old rancher could effect with his nose.

"Now dash some water in his face," Sam Black directed.

CAL WATSON came to with a grunt. He looked about in quick concern. Then his lips tightened as he took in the situation.

"You can beg for your life now, Cal," Sam Black jeered. "But I'll be hard to soften. I want to see just how this thing works: It's the best idea I ever thought up. Course if you'd agree to sign over any rights you claim to have on this lousy little spread to me and get out of the country—"

"I'll see you in hell first!" Cal Watson flared. "You can't just step in and run a man off his—"

"Oh, take your time to think it over!" Sam Black smiled. "You won't begin to talk turkey 'till that water gets up around your chin!" He chuckled in excited anticipation.

Cal Watson struggled feebly. He tried to pull himself up. Already he felt the growing terror of a trapped animal.

"Too bad for a man to die just because he won't listen to reason." Sam Black was bent over, hands on his knees, looking down into the barrel. He was grinning evilly, enjoying the show completely. His two men stood by him, Red Dozier with a poker face, Tush Slawson with a smirk of deep satisfaction on his unsightly countenance.

Sam Black's holster rattled then. A calm voice came from behind. "Git yer dam hands up!"

The three men tensed. There was a look of surprise and deep disgust on Sam Black's face. He had forgotten the boy temporarily. And besides, he hadn't thought the little cuss would be able to stand up for a day or so.

Red Dozier's hands started up slowly and then he made a quick left-sided dive toward the barrel, his right hand clawing leather. A quick shot screamed after him,

missed and ricocheted off the nearby rock bluff with an angry buzz. The boy's second bullet caught him as he turned quickly to snap a shot at Ben Watson and slide behind the barrel at the same time. Red Dozier rose to his full length, left hand clutching at his stomach, a shocked expression crowding the grim intent from his face. The heavy gun fell from a nerveless right hand. Red Dozier slumped to the ground then in slow motion.

Sam Black, his holster clean, had run for the nearest protection. A slender oak tree twenty feet away. Tush Slawson had jumped to the right and kept backing off as he clawed for his gun. He had it now and was sending his first slug at the boy.

It caught the kid in his left thigh, whirled him around. The boy stumbled, sank to his right knee. He pulled weakly at the heavy hammer on the big gun.

Tush Slawson's next bullet ripped at the boy's old brush jumper, buckled a rib in his left side. But it hadn't packed the terrific jolt the other one carried. With his shooting right hand stiff at his bandaged side, Tush Slawson was doing poor shooting with his left hand. He was clumsy and slow. But he saw two bullets strike home, and a kill gleam crept into his eyes.

As Tush Slawson brought back the hammer of his gun for the third shot, Ben Watson raised Sam Black's .45 with both hands. He was growing weak now. It seemed double heavy in his hands. The boy sighted the big gun deliberately and pulled the trigger.

Tush Slawson took a slug in the chest, bowed over and coughed. He straightened up then and tried to bring the big gun in line. It was ready for shooting, the hammer already back. Tush Slawson's knees buckled then. He jerked the trigger desperately as he fell. The wild bullet tore a ripping gash in the ground at Ben Watson's feet.

SAM BLACK came out of his hiding then. The man was desperate. He had thought to charge the boy while he was occupied with Tush Slawson. Sam Black had a club in his right hand. There was a panicky, desperate look in his eyes.

Ben Watson swung his smoking gun on the advancing man and Sam Black

stopped suddenly. He looked down at Tush Slawson and a shudder ran through his powerful frame. He looked at the boy then.

"Ben—Ben Black! "You can't shoot me! I'm your father!"

The boy was still kneeling on his right knee. He was swaying a little now, his face a deep pallor. The kid felt weak, sick in his stomach. He wanted to throw up.

"You're lyin', Black!" the kid said. He eared back the hammer of the heavy gun.

"I'm not lyin'!" Sam Black said desperately. "I'm tellin' yuh the truth! That slinkin' devil in the barrel yonder stole you from me when you was three years old. Ask him! Ask Cal Watson if I ain't your father!"

The kid's lips tightened. He bent over, crawled to the old barrel on all fours, dragging his numb left leg after him. But still he kept the heavy gun pointing toward Sam Black.

The boy sucked in a short breath when he saw old Cal Watson's face. He'd never seen a face like that in his life. The water had welled up to the old rancher's neck now, but it wasn't fright that Cal Watson showed in his face. It was misery.

"Pa," the boy said slowly. "You ain't never talked much about me for some reason. You don't have to now. All I want you to say is that Sam Black's lyin'."

Cal Watson was quiet for a long time. When he did speak, his voice was so low the boy could barely hear it.

"He ain't lyin', Ben," the old man said. He lowered his head. "Sam Black is your pa!"

"You see!" the big man said, his voice strong again. "Put down that gun. We'll let the blasted coyote die now. You ought to shoot him, though. You ought to shoot him in the guts for lyin' to you like he has, for never tellin' you he wasn't your pa!"

The boy's eyes were hard now. He stared at Sam Black unbelievably. Then he looked back at Cal Watson. The old man wouldn't look at him. He had thrown back his face now, shut his eyes. The water was up to old Cal Watson's chin.

"That's the reason I was tryin' to get

back this ranch he took away from me when he took you," Sam Black continued. "I knew you wouldn't believe me until we got rid of Cal Watson and I could prove I was your pa. I've been workin' for you, Ben, tryin' to get the ranch back and give you your rightful place in life, with a real pa and all that. You're with me, ain't you, kid? Put down that gun. You couldn't afford to accidentally shoot your own pa!"

The boy knelt there motionless by the old barrel. His face was dark now, lips tight. The kid's eyes were cold and hard. He was trying to work the shock from his mind. Beads of cold sweat stood out on his forehead. Livid streaks of white splotched his upper cheeks. The kid's lips were trembling.

SAM BLACK saw the signs and he stepped forward with an easy smile. "Don't blame you, kid! I'd get sore, too. Nobody's got a right to pull a trick on any human being like the one Cal Watson handed you."

The kid's shoulders slumped. The heavy gun sagged slightly. Sounds of strangulation came from the barrel then.

Ben tensed suddenly. He clasped the heavy gun in both hands, held the muzzle at a slanting angle on the old barrel and pulled the trigger. Water poured from the deep crease. Sam Black stopped suddenly, swore.

"Why you little—" he cut his sentence short and turned quickly, dived for the fallen body of Tush Slawson. It gave the boy just time enough to pull back the heavy hammer. He already had the gun in line when Sam Black whirled around, Tush Slawson's fallen gun in his right hand. Sam Black's own gun crashed out at him as the man clawed frantically at the hammer of his fallen henchman's weapon. He was bent low, in a gunman's crouch.

The big man's head jerked back suddenly. He went stiff all over. He clawed at his face with a hairy left hand. Sam Black pitched over on his belly then, as if he was diving into a shallow creek. A round, black pool of blood welled out of his forehead.

Old Cal Watson blew some more water out of his nostrils. His frame shook with

a hollow cough. "You just done some-thin' that'll be hard to live outta your mind, Ben," he said from within the barrel. "You hadn't ought to a'shot your own pa."

The boy reached in his pocket and pulled out a worn jackknife. He cut the rope that held old Cal Watson down in the barrel. The old rancher rose slowly. The boy untied his hands clumsily. His side and leg were beginning to wake up and hurt now.

"Come'ere!" a weak voice came from a low fern-cloaked drain made by running water from one of the springs. Ben and old Cal walked over cautiously. "Help me outta here," Red Dozier said, his voice low.

Ben and old Cal pulled the wounded man out of the fern, leaned him up against the barrel.

"Don't ever shoot a man in the belly." Red Dozier looked at the boy. "A man is too weak and numb to fight and still he can't die quick. I've shot many a man in the belly just to make his misery last. Now I got it myself. I'm gonna die pretty soon. Hell, I ought to! I need to die a hunnerd times for the things I've done.

"A man like me don't think much about dyin' though 'till he's lookin' it in the face. It makes a man feel so dam weak. It makes him do things he never thought of doing before. Like now, it's makin' me tell yuh that Sam Black *ain't* your pa. That me an' Sam an' Tush kilt your pa eight years ago when the big land rush was on up this a'way. Shot your pa off the spring-board of his waggin. He put up a fight first though. A stray bullet got your ma. Sam took the land grant your pa had got from the government and you. We burned everything else. He aimed to settle on the ranch here. Wanted it special because of the springs. But when the big rush died down and they was nobody around to work some graft on, he pulled stakes. You'll find that old land grant, some pictures of your pa and ma and other things in a little steel box Sam took from your pa. It's back at our camp at Panther Branch Springs. That's 'bout all. I want'a drink of spring water now."

The boy was standing there in a daze, taking in every sound coming from the dying man's lips. His eyes were shining.

He picked up Cal Watson's ragged old Stetson from where it lay on the ground then, went to get some water. He had filled the hat and was about to return when he heard old Cal Watson's voice.

"Never mind," the old rancher said.

"**I** WISH you'd let me rode my own hoss home, dammit!" the boy complained as he lay limply in old Cal Watson's arms. "Hell, I ain't hurt bad! Besides, this old roan's rougher'n my palomino!"

"Be quiet," Cal Watson said. "You need some rest and a good bit of patchin' up."

"I can't rest good till I get it all straight in my mind. How'd you come to have the ranch—an' me?"

"When the land rush played out in the wilds a hundred miles from here, I kept comin'." Old Cal Watson talked slowly, as if he were seeing the story he was about to relate unfold before his eyes. He looked straight ahead. "Most everybody was from Alabamy. They found good land before they got here. Just a few had grants, the others could plop down anywhere they liked. Them with the grants went on to certain places. Me, I wasn't lookin' for no farmin' or ranchin' land. I'd heard a heap 'bout gold lyin' a foot deep in Texas creeks. I was huntin' me a gold producin' creek. You could hear anything them days!

"I stopped where our ranch house is now. Was just a log shack' there then. You was a kid of three. Sam Black was beatin' the stuffin' out of you for some-thin' or other. I tried to stop him, and Black and his men beat me up pretty bad. They rode off then, leavin' you behind. Took my horse and supplies. They didn't come back, so I just sort of hung on. I was too stove-up to travel anyhow. When they didn't ever show up, me an' you just sort of made a home of it there! I was sort of tired lookin' for a creek with gold a foot deep in it anyhow!"

"You never even been married?" the boy asked.

"Naw, I ain't," Cal Watson admitted.

"No wonder you was a little hazy about how my ma looked. You told me one time her eyes was blue and another time they was brown!"

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"I guess I might-nigh lied to you, Ben," old Cal Watson's voice was solemn, apologetic. "I never come right out and told you I was your pa. You just took it that I was. I told you your ma died long time ago, which I was pretty sure she had. I meant to do it when you got old enough to understand, but I just never could work up the spunk to tell you that I figured Sam Black was your pa. A young'un needs a pa. It's kinda like them two deer. Old Black Horn might even a'been the spike buck's sire. Anyhow, he was older and knew how to lead the young buck outta danger. That's sort of the way I figured to do a little maverick like you. A kid needs somebody to call pa, and I didn't think it was no uncommonly bad thing to let it be me. Anyhow, it warn't nobody else around for you to say it to. I shore hate it that I've messed your life up this a'way!"

"Aw, pa!" The boy's voice was a little unsteady. "You talk just like that blamed preacher we heard 'way over to Frog Joy one Christmas! You're pretty old and rough and ugly as hell, but you are the only man I'd ever want to call pa. I guess you'll have to go on puttin' up with me bein' your kid. I like the hook-up as she lays!"

Old Cal Watson blew his nose. He tried to snort then like he was taking a cold. He blinked watery eyes and clucked at the old roan.

"Pa," Ben Watson said. "This dam old nag is rougher'n hell! Why don't you get a good horse like mine and shoot this old . . . ?"

"Son!" old Cal Watson snapped. "I'm gonna beat your tail raw if you don't stop that plague-goned cussin'! Dammit! Ain't I ever gonna learn you no manners?"

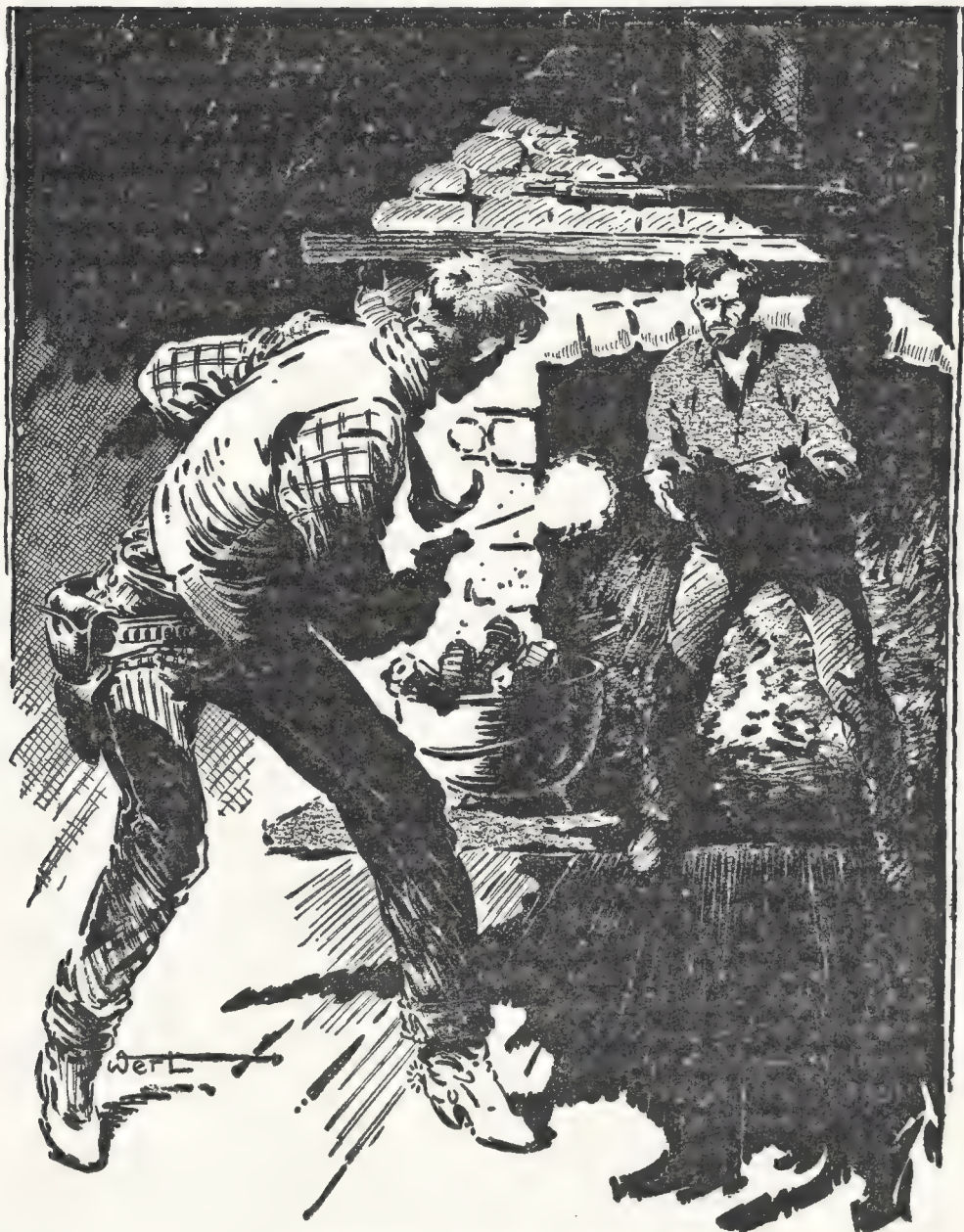
"I've done quit it, nearbouts, pa," the boy spoke up quickly. "I'm gettin' better all the time. Quittin' sort of gradual like. Hell, pa," the boy sighed, lay back contentedly in the old rancher's arms, "you got to give a man time. . . ."



SHOOT, AND BE DAMNED!

By Jackson V. Scholz

Joe Reed had ridden squarely into a six-gun trap, taking a chance on hang-noose law—to prove to himself that two wrongs make a right.



Reed whirled, and blasted a single shot.

THE HARSH monotony of the landscape was relieved when Joe Reed topped a rise and saw the huddle of ranch buildings in the distance. They

looked as if a carbine ball might reach them, yet he knew they were at least five miles away. Wyoming distances were tricky. Reed's hands, long-fingered, strong,

were resting on the saddle horn. He flicked a finger on the reins, and his weary horse stopped heavily. The pack horse just behind was glad to follow suit, although its burden was not great—bed roll and a war bag, with its scanty cowhand belongings, were lashed beneath a tarp.

Reed raised a hand and pushed his broad-brimmed Stetson back. The hat was weather-beaten but still useful in its varied forms. The hat was banded with a strip of plaited leather. Matches and a book of papers for his cigarettes were tucked into the band to protect them from the perspiration of his body.

With the hat brim raised the whiteness of his forehead showed in contrast to the wind-tanned texture of his face. It was the face of a man in his early twenties, a face in which the lines of youth still fought against encroaching lines of bitterness. A hardness tempered with unbridled recklessness was creeping in. The mark had not, as yet, become a scar, but, given time, it would.

His hand reached toward the pocket of his grey, sweat-darkened flannel shirt. A Durham tag on its yellow string was dangling from the pocket, but Joe Reed didn't touch it. He tested the moisture of his tongue against his lips, and decided that a smoke would make it worse.

He wiped his wet palms along his dusty levis, and gathered the reins again. He applied a light pressure with his knees, but the horse beneath him only grunted. A second sharper pressure brought another grunt, slow action, and the creak of leather as the cavalcade got under way again.

The buildings of the ranch retreated doggedly. Reed didn't let it fret him. It was a minor irritation as compared to other things he chose to think about, things he clung to with the stubbornness of a man who keeps a cactus stalk beneath his shirt. Dust billowed about him in a following cloud, and he ignored it.

The ranch inevitably drew nearer, a cluster of squat buildings with a few cottonwoods about them. For some time past he had noted scattered cattle on the sparse, dry range. Some had been close enough to let him see the brand, Box T. He was following a fence now, and beyond it was the stubble of alfalfa. A pair of

riders were coming toward him on the road, as if they'd seen his dust plume, and were coming out to meet him.

This proved to be correct, a fact which registered in Reed's mind. Wyoming hospitality, he'd found, was sound, but not to the extent of sending welcoming committees. Some of his tiredness slipped away. A watchfulness took hold of him.

One of the approaching men rode slightly in the lead, as if it were his rightful place. He was mounted on a big roan stallion, a horse whose size and ruggedness were needed for its rider's weight.

The man himself was burly to the point of grossness. His belly podded out above the pommel, but a look of flabbiness was missing. His head was round, with the features crowded in the center of his face—the jovial type. His eyes were china marbles.

The other man was smaller, almost frail, with the weazened toughness of old leather. Obviously a half breed, his eyes were wicked, steady little pools of ink. He wore two guns, with the bottoms of their holsters fastened to his legs with rawhide thongs. The big man greeted:

"HOWDY, friend." His voice held the rumble of good fellowship, but his eyes were blank as agate.

Reed said, "Howdy," noncommittally.

"My name's Flegg, Sam Flegg. This waddie's Gimpie Hawk."

"I answer to Joe Reed."

"Travelin' far, Reed?" It was the question of a man who assumed his right to know the answer. Reed felt its crowding force. Reed's eyes, a smoky blue, went flat. A muscle at the angle of his jaw began a slow and rhythmic dance.

"I may be," he said carefully.

Flegg chuckled fatly in his throat. "I didn't ask you that, my boy," he said. "I'll put it plainer. Where're you bound for?"

Reed reached for the tobacco in his shirt, and took the papers from his hat band. He built a smoke, easing his position in the saddle as he did so. It brought the walnut handle of his six-gun closer to his hand.

He didn't like this pair, particularly Hawk, as watchful and unblinking as a snake. He reached for a match, and flicked it with his thumb-nail into flame.

He took his time with a deliberation he intended to be insolent. It suited him to act like that, because his nerves were raw, the tumult in him was a reckless, shapeless thing, well known to men who can't subdue the bitter goading of their thoughts. It suited him to prod these strangers, just because he knew them to be dangerous. In answer to Flegg's question, he replied: "It's none of your damn business."

The outcome of the instant was suspended in fine balance. Reed sat relaxed, his muscles loose. He'd taught himself that trick. Hawk, in contrast, tightened like a wire. A rattler would warn before it struck, Hawk wouldn't. The hunger in his face was turned toward Flegg. Flegg did a strange thing then.

He made a careful backward gesture with his hand, a gesture of restraint, as if he knew what Hawk were thinking—what the man might do. Hawk showed his teeth in disappointment, then returned his beady eyes to Reed. Flegg sat a moment in deep thought before he let his chuckle burble to the surface.

"You're spooky, son," he said. "I didn't mean offense. Your business is your own. In fact, I need another hand, and that's what I was comin' to, because you looked like you was driftin'. I'd like to put you on the payroll. I'm the Box T ramrod. We could use your rope."

"And gun?" asked Joe Reed pointedly.

"That, too, perhaps. What say?"

"Gun wages?"

"Fair enough. Now, how about it?"

Reed raised his shoulders in a shrug. "Why not?" he said indifferently.

He followed the pair as they turned and started back. He was thoughtful as he rode, his indifference ebbing slowly. He had dealt himself a hand in something, or, to be exact, Sam Flegg had dealt the hand to him with cards too crudely marked to fool a sage hen. He wondered if Flegg took him for a locoed steer. The answer, probably, was "no." Sam Flegg was wily as a wolf. He had already fitted Joe Reed into the picture somewhere. Just where, Reed didn't know—as yet.

Reed had, by direct questioning, established the fact that the Box T was not a peaceful spread. Peace-loving foremen, accompanied by a body guard, did not subject strange riders to the scrutiny Reed

had faced. Nor did smart foremen, faced with trouble, take on strange gun fighters with such casualness. For all Flegg knew, Reed couldn't shuck a gun with speed enough to hit a tomato can.

THEY came to the cluster of ranch buildings. The main house was low and solid, built of hewn pine logs, dragged from the foothills of the Rockies in the distance. Its symmetry was comfortable and practical. It had a prosperous look.

The men dismounted at the corral gate. Flegg and Hawk unsaddled, turned their horses loose. Reed took more time. He rubbed both horses down with handfuls of dry hay, watered them sparingly, then brought them oats from a grain bin in the barn. He corraled them after that, found a peg for his saddle, shouldered his bed and war-bag, and headed for the bunk house.

There were nine bunks, only one of them unused. Reed took that one, while five punchers glanced up briefly from a stud game, then went on playing. Why weren't these waddies working? Reed found no trouble with the answer. They weren't paid for working.

They ran to type, an ugly type, unclean and predatory. It gave Reed something of a start that he should find himself associated with such men. He tried to tell himself he didn't give a damn, that nothing mattered, that any road to hell would serve his purpose. He spread his bed roll on the rawhide springs, stretched out upon the bunk, and let his bitterness take hold.

It was a bitterness as old as history, the kind that fills a man with strange bewilderment at the things he thinks and does. It was centered, naturally enough, about a woman, Nora Wallace. He had hoped to marry Nora, until the matter of an inheritance came up. A relative had left the girl some money, not a staggering amount, but more than Reed could have scraped together, even in a pinch.

Nora had invested her inheritance without consulting Reed. She may have erred somewhat in this, despite the fact that her intentions were the highest. She had invested in Joe Reed's small spread.

She had done so by the simple process of buying up Reed's mortgage. She had attempted, then, to present it to him as her share in their combined estate. The trouble

had started at this point. Joe Reed went on the prod before he'd had a chance to think things over.

"I won't take it," he had stated flatly.

"But Joe, dear," she had argued patiently. "Don't you understand what marriage means? It means that everything you have belongs to me and everything I have belongs to you."

"We're not married yet."

"But Joe, we *will* be shortly. Please try to understand."

"My job is to *make* a home for you—not to have you hand me one."

"That isn't fair. It will be my home too."

"Then you can have it!"

Her voice had been brittle when she'd asked, "What do you mean by that?"

Joe Reed had dived in deeper than he'd meant to. "I mean you'll have to sell the mortgage."

"No, Joe," she had answered quietly.

A pair of stubborn people, too violently in love to think as clearly as the present crisis in their lives demanded.

"Maybe you'd like some time to think it over," Reed had said.

"Perhaps I would," she'd snapped back angrily.

So Reed had ridden away while the bitterness was still on him. It had receded, now, to leave him sick inside, confused, bewildered. He was shocked at the enormity of the thing he'd done, resentful of his stiff, unbending pride, afraid of what he'd let it do to him.

He obeyed the supper gong a little later, washed up and entered the ranch house with the others. The bare plank table stretched down the center of the room, a huge room, at least forty feet in length. There was a fireplace at one end, a tremendous thing of stone, eight feet in width and six feet high. Above the fireplace was the mounted head of a snarling grizzly.

REED got an unpleasant jolt as he sat down at the table. A girl of about Nora's age came in from the lean-to kitchen and took her place at the head of the table. Her hair and eyes were dark. She was attractive. But, beneath the smooth tan of her face, Reed saw the pallor of a girl whose nerves had almost reached the breaking point. The features of her face were

strong, strong enough to remain firm against the fear her eyes could not conceal.

Reed's first feeling was of strong resentment. He was battling against the memory of one woman, and now he found himself in contact with another. His eyes were flat, expressionless as he let them rest upon her fleetingly.

A normal, healthy curiosity followed. The girl's brother sat upon her right. No doubt of his identity. They looked alike, even to expression. The difference was, that the brother's fear was naked. What courage he possessed was receiving a terrific punishment.

Sam Flegg sat the other end of the table. He packed his food away prodigiously, but still found time to talk. He addressed the girl as Jane, her brother as Hal. He tried deliberately, it seemed, to fan the hatred in their eyes. It seemed to be a game which Flegg enjoyed. Reed felt his anger rising, but he pushed it down. The girl was probably getting just what she deserved. She had given Reed but a passing glance. Her eyes had been openly contemptuous.

A pair of poker games got under way that evening in the bunk house. Reed wasn't invited to join either. There was warning in the way the men ignored him. They all seemed to know why he was here. Reed himself was beginning to suspect.

He stretched out on his bunk again, hoping to gain some information from the desultory talk. He was dog tired, however, from the saddle, and he fell asleep.

He awoke to the violent entrance of a cowhand. Reed heard the running footsteps, and his eyes were open as the man came thumping through the doorway on his high-heeled boots. The man was young. His face was lined and pinched with the evilness of one who lacks an inner strength. He was breathless, with a touch of panic.

"Chuck's gone!" he exploded hoarsely. "He ain't around!"

The swift silence had the quality of a cocked gun. Even the layers of tobacco smoke seemed motionless. The smoke moved sluggishly when San Flegg heaved his big bulk from a table. He moved toward the cow-hand who had just rushed in. Flegg's step was light despite his size. Facing the hand, he demanded in a purring voice:

"Now, just what happened, Runt?"

Runt tried to talk. His voice stuck, and he had to force it out. "He—he just ain't here, that's all!"

"You were supposed to keep an eye on him," Sam Flegg reminded softly. "You knew I didn't trust him."

"Yeah, Sam, I know, but—"

"You sort of dozed off, huh?"

Flegg slapped Runt with all the force of his open hand. The man was powerful. Runt went down. Flegg picked him up with one hand. He drove the other fist into Runt's face, shattering the nose. Flegg struck twice more. Runt screamed—went limp. Flegg threw him against the wall, and turned away before Runt's body crumpled to the floor.

"All out!" Flegg snapped. "We'll check the corral horses—see if Chuck's bay is missing."

Reed swung his feet to the floor, and stood up. Flegg turned on him and said:

"Not you."

"Why not?" demanded Reed.

Flegg studied him a moment thoughtfully, then said across his shoulder:

"Gimpy!"

Hawk sidled up with the motion of a crab. A falling horse had crippled him for life. The hungry look was on his face again.

Flegg said, "We're not ready for the drifter yet. Take care of him, Gimpy."

Reed shot an involuntary glance toward his gun belt, which he'd hung upon a peg beside the bunk. He wondered why he'd been so big a fool. Hawk saw the glance, and said:

"Be careful!" His voice held the whispering-quality of a crawling snake.

He came toward Joe Reed swiftly, but did not draw his guns until five feet away. Reed knew the breed. Good six-gun shots did not require two guns. If a man could really shoot, one bullet was enough. Men like Hawk depended on close work, together with an overpowering weight of lead. Hawk liked to do his killing with a lot of blood.

He was ready now. Reed didn't move. He didn't flinch when Hawk jabbed one gun into his belly, and pistol-whipped him with the other. Unconsciousness came swift and mercifully.

7—Action Stories—Spring.

JOE REED came to upon his bunk. It was a blurred awakening, and painful. His head was one big lump of agony. He tried to raise his hand to it, and failed. He was securely tied.

His thoughts cleared swiftly after that. He heard soft cursing, vicious, foul. Flegg's name was repeated frequently. Reed turned his head, grunted from the hurt, and saw the puncher, Runt. He had dragged himself to a sitting position against the wall. His face was mashed and bleeding. His shirt was soaked with blood.

"Get out your knife and cut this rope," Reed said.

Runt cursed Reed for awhile. Reed let him wind up, then said:

"You want to get that big hog, Flegg, but you haven't got the guts. I have. Get out your knife. I'll do your dirty work."

Runt stared from swollen eyes while he let the thought sink in. His hatred quickly got the better of his caution. He stood erect on tottering legs, fumbled in his pocket for his knife, then came across to Reed. He cut the ropes, and said:

"All right, go after him."

"I will," said Reed. "First, what's the set-up here? What did Flegg want me for?"

Runt closed his battered lips, looked scared, then let his hate for Flegg win out.

"Hal Barlow'll get killed," he said. "Flegg pins the blame on you and turns you over to the sheriff."

"Sounds logical," admitted Reed. He was standing now, buckling on his gun belt. "Why does Flegg want Hal out of the way?"

The scared look came into Runt's eyes. The enormity of what he was revealing began to dawn on him. He made a belated, desperate effort to repair the damage. "Damn you! Get back into that bunk!" he ordered.

Reed laughed at him. Runt went for his gun, his motion jerky. Reed's move, by contrast, was like the flow of light. His gun came out and kept on coming. Its long barrel clipped the other just below the ear, and Runt went down again.

Reed picked him up and tossed him in the bunk. He tied Runt's hands and feet, then turned him toward the wall. Anyone glancing at the bunk, might well assume that Reed was still a prisoner.

Reed slipped outside. He stood for a moment in the shadow of the bunkhouse until his eyes became accustomed to the dark. He saw, with some surprise, that the eastern sky was getting pale. His slumber had been long and sound.

He heard the rise of angry voices, as the men in the corral failed to find Chuck's horse. He listened for Flegg's voice, and couldn't hear it. Thinking fast, he drew conclusions from the things he knew and guessed.

The man named Chuck had disappeared. Flegg would reason Chuck had gone for help. The uncertainty of this might force Flegg's hand. He might act sooner than he had intended to. In fact, he might be acting now. Reed started for the house, the reason for this action hazy in his mind.

The light from an oil lamp showed through the front window as he neared the building. Reed circled to the back, slipped into the lean-to kitchen, and padded softly toward the door which led into the big main room.

Peering carefully around the door, he saw Sam Flegg and Hal. Flegg, bulky and assured, was standing with spread legs. Hal Barlow, rumbled still from sleep, had pulled on levis, shirt and boots. He was staring at Sam Flegg with sullen fear. Flegg asked:

"Did you send Chuck away?"

"No, no," Hal chattered. "I didn't. I swear I didn't."

"He's gone," said Flegg. "I think you'd better come and help us look for him."

Hal said, "Yeah. Yeah, sure."

He tried to move, and swayed as if his feet were rooted to the floor. He couldn't take his eyes from Flegg's.

"Come on, Hal," Flegg said softly.

HAL made a lumbering motion toward the door, but his sister appeared suddenly to block the way. She had drawn a heavy cotton robe about her nightgown. Her hair, in a long smooth braid, reached down her back. It made her look ridiculously young.

Flegg said unctuously, "Now, Jane, you mustn't interfere."

Jane's face was pale. Her voice was strained and thin. She said, "I know what you intend to do."

Flegg's voice took on an edge, "Don't

interfere!" His hands knotted into fists.

"You shan't, you beast! You shan't!" She was between her brother and Flegg now.

Flegg hunched his shoulders, took a forward step, and moved his hand toward Jane. Reed stepped into the room. His voice was brittle:

"Flegg!"

Flegg's big hand froze in mid-air. His round head pivoted slowly on his neck. His eyes were watchful, careful. Reassurance came into them when he saw Reed standing empty handed. He turned toward Reed with slow deliberation.

"Go after it, fat man!" invited Reed.

Flegg made his try. The man was fast. His hand streaked for his gun. There was the meaty slap of his palm upon the butt. Reed's hand was in motion too, a smooth, short upward swing which brought the gun out with it.

The explosions were almost simultaneous. It was hard to tell which gun crashed first. The answer wasn't clear until Flegg's gun dropped with a clatter to the floor. The .45 slug in his shoulder had spun him half about, had struck in time to spoil his aim. Reed, still poised, unhurt, awaited Flegg's next move.

It was an unexpected move. Flegg turned his back and started for the door, his right arm dangling at his side. His broad back was deliberately exposed to Reed. It was the shrewd gamble of a man with nerve enough to see it through. It worked. Reed trained his gun, but couldn't squeeze the trigger. He couldn't shoot an unarmed man—not even Flegg. When Flegg passed through the door, Hal whirled on Reed.

"Why didn't you shoot him?" he demanded hoarsely.

"I don't know," admitted Reed.

"I know," said Jane quietly. The words gave Reed a strange and unexpected warmth.

He didn't let her commendation cloud his common sense, however. He moved swiftly to the lamp, and blew it out. He stepped to the window, then, and peering cautiously around the edge, he watched Sam Flegg's retreating bulk in the strengthening light of dawn.

The sound of gunfire had brought men running from the corral. Flegg stopped

them, ordered them into the bunkhouse. Hal Barlow asked:

"Are they coming after us?"

Reed turned toward him, surprised at Hal's steadiness of tone. The light was still too dim to see Hal's features, but the outline of his body showed a straight and unexpected confidence. There was a soundness to the youngster, after all, decided Reed, the sort of soundness which requires a little powder smoke to bring it to the surface. Reed made no comment on the change. Instead he said:

"Flegg wants to get himself patched up. They'll talk things over first. Then they'll come after us."

"It'll be good to have a fighting chance," said Hal. "I wouldn't have had the chance, except for you."

"Forget it," Reed said shortly. "Where's your sister?"

"Gone to change her clothes, I guess."

JANE returned a moment later. She was wearing the flannel shirt and denim pants she used for riding. She carried a 30-30 in her hand, carried it familiarly. She said to Reed:

"Why are you helping us?"

"I don't know," he admitted honestly.

The answer seemed to satisfy her, but she had to get things straight. "You still have time to leave," she said.

Reed eyed her with the blank distrust he had decided to employ toward all women in the future.

"I've drawn cards. I'll play it out," he told her shortly. "How can we turn this place into a fort?"

"Quite easily," Jane said. "There are only two doors, one into the kitchen and one into the bedrooms. They're both thick and solid, and can be barred from the inside."

They barred the doors. Hal Barlow, with his own six-shooter, stationed himself at the rear window, behind the abutment of the huge fireplace. Jane watched through the side window. Reed stayed in front. He had Flegg's gun now as well as his own. He had reloaded both of them. Daylight was coming fast, and the stillness was oppressive. Reed watched the bunkhouse for any sign of movement. His nerves were getting taut. To relieve the tension, he said:

"Maybe it ain't any of my business, but I'd sort of like to know what this is all about."

"It seems as if you have a right to know," said Jane. "What part confuses you the most?"

Reed didn't want to talk to Jane, because she was a girl. It appeared, however, that he had no choice.

"Who's Flegg?" he demanded shortly.

"He was dad's foreman for many years. Dad trusted Flegg, because dad was the sort who trusted everybody. Flegg gradually brought in the type of men you've seen, but dad was too stubborn to admit it. He gave Flegg more and more responsibility toward the last. Dad died two months ago, and left a will which shows Flegg's influence."

Jane paused. Reed kept his eyes glued to the bunkhouse.

"The will left the entire spread to Hal and me," continued Jane. "It provided, though, that in case anything happened to Hal, Jim Flegg was to run the ranch for me. He would be in complete control."

"That clears things up," said Reed. "If Flegg could get rid of Hal, and hang the murder on a stranger, me for instance, he could bleed you white. How long has this been going on?"

"We've been prisoners since dad died."

"Who's Chuck?"

"The only loyal hand left on the spread. I'm glad he got away."

"Will he get help here in time?"

"It all depends on when he left, and where he goes for help."

Hal's voice broke in from the end of the room. "If Frank Lake hadn't turned into a coyote, we maybe wouldn't be needin' help right now."

"Don't speak of Frank like that," the girl said sharply.

"Why not?" demanded Hal. "You were goin' to marry him, weren't you? And he let you down, didn't he?"

"Hal, please!"

Hal, however, was wound up. "He quit comin' here because you inherited half of a ranch, because you were suddenly better off than him. The dumb waddie was afraid of what folks might think."

"A lot of men are that way, Hal," Jane told him quietly. "You can't blame Frank for that."

"You mean you're still in love with him?" demanded Hal incredulously.

"Of course. And he's in love with me. If we get out of this alive, you'll see."

Slow color crept from Joe Reed's neck, and settled in his face. He was staring at the first clear picture of himself he'd seen for many days, and the picture was not flattering. He wondered if he'd ever have a chance to paint it over. It didn't look that way. The bunkhouse door came open. Flegg, followed by his men, came out into the daylight. Some carried rifles. They spread out rapidly.

"Here they come," said Reed. "Keep out of sight."

Flegg's bull voice carried across the distance. "Come out of there, the three of you! You've got one minute! After that we'll smoke you out!"

Hal said steadily, "I'll go. I'm the one they want."

"They want me too," said Reed. "I'll side you."

"If either of you go out that door," said Jane, "I'll kill myself."

BOTH men turned to stare at her. Reed's pulse began to hammer, for he knew that Jane would keep her word. He turned and showed himself an instant at the window. He broke a small pane with his gun.

"Come get us, Flegg!" he called, then ducked for cover, as half a dozen slugs crashed through the window, scattering glass.

Flegg's men spread out, took cover, and opened with the rifles. Some of the bullets battered harmlessly into the outside logs. Most of the shots came through the windows to bury themselves in the opposite walls. The three inside crouched low. Reed summed up the situation:

"We can't shoot back at 'em unless we use the windows. They'd hit us sure in that case. We can only cover three sides of the house. They can sneak up on the fourth, and crawl below the windows. The only way they can get in, though, is through the windows, but first they'd have to bust the sash. Our best bet's to lie low till they try it—if they've got the nerve."

Hal and Jane agreed to this. Each covered one of the three windows from the side. Hal said:

"They could burn us out—set fire to the house."

"I don't think Flegg'd do it," Reed said thoughtfully. "He's figurin' already that this place is just as good as his. He wouldn't burn his own house down, not until he'd tried everything else."

Reed's theory, for the time at any rate, was sustained. The attackers maintained a desultory firing, which diminished gradually when they found that the defenders had no intention of making targets of themselves.

When the firing finally stopped, it was logical to assume that Flegg had diagnosed the defensive strategy against which he had to cope. A period of silence followed.

"Flegg's figurin' out a plan," Reed guessed aloud.

His guess was confirmed by abrupt developments. The firing was resumed in greater volume. Rifles and six-shooters blazed away in a fusillade which made no sense. It seemed a pointless waste of lead and powder, as if the attackers were only trying to make noise.

Reed stiffened as this thought hit home. He said abruptly, "Watch close now! They ain't makin' all that racket just for fun."

He centered every faculty on the oblong of the window. If it hadn't been for Jane, he would have died that way. He heard her warning cry:

"The fireplace! Reed! The fireplace!"

Reed spun about, half crouched, and gave a startled grunt. A fraction of a second was all the time he had to size things up. The gunman, Hawk, was standing in the fireplace, venomous and wicked. He had just dropped down the shallow chimney. He had probably hoped to adjust his eyes to inside light before he was discovered. Jane's scream threw him into action.

He threw two shots at her. She staggered back against the wall. Her rifle clattered to the floor. Hal stood bewildered, not able to see Hawk, not knowing what had happened.

Hawk opened up on Reed, both guns spitting flame from the semi-darkness of the fireplace. He was using two-gun tactics, trying to shatter his opponent with sheer weight of lead.

He was not accustomed, though, to killing from that distance—forty feet. One bullet reached its target, creased a shallow furrow

in Reed's shoulder—not enough to spoil Reed's steady aim.

He took his time, lined up his sights and squeezed the trigger. He heard the impact of the slug against Hawk's narrow chest. The force of the bullet slammed Hawk back against the stone. He tried to raise his guns again. Reed's second bullet hit him just beside the first. Hawk staggered, coughed blood, and pitched forward on his face.

REED whirled toward Jane. She was still upon her feet. Hal was running toward her, when she said:

"I'm all right. The bullet hit the rifle stock. Watch the windows!"

It was sound advice. The main attack was certain to come now, because the men outside would believe that Hawk had cleared the way. When it didn't come, Reed was confused. There was shooting outside, lots of it. Hal risked a look, and yelled:

"They're here! Frank Lake! He's got an army with him!"

Reed sprinted for the door, but when he got outside, the show was over. He

saw Jim Flegg's big bulk sprawled lifeless in the dirt. Several of Flegg's men were also down. The others reached their empty hands into the air.

Facing them was a mounted group of grim-faced cow hands. One of them, big, tanned, wild-eyed, was off his horse and pounding toward the house on high-heeled boots. He roared at Reed:

"Where's Jane. Is she all right?"

Reed didn't have a chance to answer. Jane came from the house like a small cyclone, and kept on going till she reached the big man's arms. Reed heard her sob: "Oh, Frank!"

Reed broke his gun and pushed fresh shells into the empty chambers. He did it with the absent air of a man whose thoughts were far away. He was walking toward the bunkhouse, grinning to himself, when Hal pulled up beside him.

"What now, Joe?" Hal asked anxiously. "Will you stick around and run this spread for me?"

Reed shook his head. "I gotta go."

"More drifting?" Hal asked disappointedly.

"Hell no! I'm goin' home!"



A Fiction House Magazine



STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, etc., required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933 of ACTION STORIES MAGAZINE, published quarterly at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1944.

State of New York, County of New York, ss.: Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Jack Byrne, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Editor of the ACTION STORIES MAGAZINE, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Fiction House, Inc., 670 Fifth Avenue, New York 19, N. Y.; Editor, Jack Byrne, 670 Fifth Avenue, New York 19, N. Y.; Managing Editor, None; Business Manager, T. T. Scott, 670 Fifth Avenue, New York 19, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Fiction House, Inc., 670 Fifth Avenue, New York 19, N. Y.; J. G. Scott, 670 Fifth Avenue, New York 19, N. Y.

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5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is (This information is required from daily publications only.)

(Signed) JACK BYRNE,
Editor,

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 20th day of September, 1944.

GEORGE G. SCHWENKE,
Notary Public,

(My commission expires March 30, 1946.)

HELL OVER BURMA

by Orlando Rigoni

The Nips held the ack-ack guarded Diphuk Pass, snapping the supply line to the Americans in Burma. Only Captain Dedman could break the squeeze play—by flying straight into a yellow trap, guided by a traitor whose life he had saved.





Hell blasted in the sky, even as Dedman's chute snapped open.

CAPTAIN Robert Dedman stood in the middle of the thatched hut which served as his office on the American Fighter Drome at Nachi Lolo, and stared at the two strange men who hungrily smoked his dwindling supply of cigarettes. The dust of miles was upon them, and the weariness.

"You admit that you come from Putao, in Jap-held Burma," Dedman addressed the tall, dark American who had given his name as Craig Holden, "and you tell us a

fantastic story of what the Japs are doing near the Diphuk Pass. We have no proof of this story but your word. Why did you come here with it?"

Craig Holden flipped the ash from his cigarette awkwardly and Dedman noticed that the tips of his left fingers were swollen like blobs of gristle and that the nails were missing. He noticed, too, the blue scar about Holden's throat like the mark left on a tree by a wire which has been strung too tightly about the trunk.

"We came here because every Chinese we met spoke of you as though you were some sort of god, Captain. They seem to feel that all China is safe in your hands, and believe me, it will take a god to smash the plot the Japs have worked out there in the mountains," Holden said with suppressed emotion.

The bit of red ribbon which Dedman wore proudly on his thick chest, told what China thought of him. It was the highest decoration they could bestow. But it was the three decorations the Japs had given him which stoked the fires of hell in his heart and made him the scourge of Nippon. One Jap bullet had pierced his square face through from cheek to cheek, leaving scars like dimples. Another had slit his scalp to the bone, putting a permanent part in his bristly blond hair. The third was still lodged near his groin, and gave him hell on damp nights.

"We have only one squadron here," Dedman explained impatiently, "and not the best of equipment. But we do have a cast-off Radar which Jimmy Cawn has put in working condition. The Chinese have moved a base hospital just over the hill from our barracks because we can tell when the Jap bombers are coming and fly out to stop them. This hospital is filled with desperate cases."

Holden said fiercely, "Other hospitals will be filled with five times as many desperate cases. Maybe you think I'm here trying to play hero. Maybe you don't trust me." Holden held out his left hand. "These fingers were mashed by a wooden mallet, one at a time. See my throat, captain? I was hung up on a wire for three days with only brief periods of rest because they were afraid I might die."

"Why?" Dedman asked shortly.

"Because I was the last hell-driver to leave Lashio before the Japs arrived. My truck broke down and I lived for months among the Chin natives. One night a village was raided and I happened to be sleeping in one of the huts. I was captured before I realized the Nips were there. They believed that we hell-drivers had ditched material and equipment along the road, and tried to make me tell where it was."

"And there wasn't any?"

"I know where there's a truckload of guns and ammunition," Holden said evenly. "I know, also, where there's a truckload of drugs and medical supplies."

At the mention of the medical supplies, a shadow detached itself from a dingy corner of the mud hut, and came quietly up to Dedman. It was General Yuong, who was more of a saint than a soldier, and more of a father to his men than a general. The plain uniform hung pathetically upon his shapeless body.

"He has been sent by God, Captain Dedman," Yuong said with a surge of hope in his voice. "We have no more drugs. The planes have not arrived. Men are undergoing major operations without the benefit of anaesthetics."

Dedman avoided looking at Yuong because he loved this old man who seemed to bear the pain of all the wounds of China in his kindly heart. Instead, Dedman spoke to Holden, not yet satisfied with the man's story. Dedman knew much about the hell-drivers, those daredevils who had nursed the truck trains over the Burma Road when the fate of China had hung in the balance. Not all of them had worked for love of China. Many of them had been lured by adventure, and high wages. The Japs paid high wages, too, and would like nothing better than to trap the Dragon Eyes, or *Dinghow Salenas*, as the Chinese called Dedman's squadron.

"How did you escape from Burma?" Dedman asked.

"In a submarine," Holden said promptly.

"A submarine?" Dedman snapped. "What kind of a submarine could ply the headwaters of the Salween?"

"It was a sort of sub. Bhamo, here," Holden indicated the Karen native of the Toungoo Hills, who smoked placidly at his side, "devised it. It fooled the Japs, and they're tricky devils."

Dedman shifted his stocky body and his gray eyes clouded. He knew just how tricky the Japs were. He had been in Pekin when the Japs had entered with smiles and large promises, and had watched them loot the city of food, treasure, and young girls. They had offered him safe passage from Pekin because America was still at peace with Japan, and the Japanese meticulously

avoided any incident which might provoke America before the Japs had completed their own cowardly preparations for it.

Dedman had deserted the caravan to which he had been assigned and had escaped by another road, only to find that caravan a little later on the road of death outside Tungchoo with every man, woman and child slaughtered by machine guns and left to rot in the sun. It was that, and the Chinese girls staked out on the plains at Paute, which had caused him to dedicate his life to the killing of Japs.

"Because the Japs are tricky, I must suspect everybody," Dedman said in a low, deadly voice.

Bhamo, whose sharp face with its square, cleft chin was inscrutable under the white turban, said with unsuspected wit, "You see, sahib Holden, if one egg proves bad, can a man trust the other eleven?"

Craig Holden's face flushed with anger. "You don't think I am a spy, do you, captain? The Japs tried hard enough to kill me after I had escaped. Their hellish patrols chased us even into China until Chinese guerrillas turned them back. Then they sent planes after me, but I evaded them. They may have a spy following me now, prepared to kill me or report my whereabouts. I took a risk coming here because the plot at Putao must be destroyed."

Dedman thought of the wounded and dying men in the hospital across the low hill which hemmed in the flying field. There were not only brave Chinese lying there trusting in the prowess of the Dragon Eyes to protect them, but there were Japs too. General Yuong was a Christian before he was a general, and insisted that even the enemy must not suffer inhumanely if it were possible to help him.

"Perhaps you could bring back the drugs," Yuong said hopefully. "The will of God must be in this, Captain."

Because Dedman didn't speak at once, Holden flared, "I came all this way expecting to find a man who knew honesty when he saw it, but I found only a fool. I believe you're afraid."

DEDMAN'S square face flushed and his big hands clenched into knots. "That's a lie," he said savagely. Personal fear had never occurred to him. He had

withstood torture almost to the death in order that Yuong might score a great victory over Yamakatsu before Chungking.

"If you don't go," Holden warned, jabbing out his third cigarette, "the new road across the Diphuk, which two hundred thousand Chinese peasants are building with their skin and flesh and bone to replace the lost Burma Road, will be destroyed."

Dedman squared his wide shoulders, and replied, "I'll talk it over with my men."

Before he could leave the hut, Jimmy Cawn rushed in, his dark face grim, and his black eyes puckered into a frown. Cawn was a lean Texan with the features of an Indian, and had a habit of talking to himself when nobody was around. Now he spoke to Dedman.

"The radar has gone dead, Dimples!" Cawn exclaimed. The Dragon Eyes called Dedman "Dimples" because of the twin scars in his cheeks, though the name fit him not at all.

Dedman tensed. "What's the matter with it?"

"I'm not sure. Whisper Lord has been running it all morning and he didn't know just when it went dead, not being very familiar with it. I found two of the tubes burned out as though the voltage had been raised suddenly. As far as I can learn, nobody has been near the power-plant but Jung Lee, the gardener."

"Go back and see what you can do with it," Dedman told Cawn. Dedman motioned Holden and Bhamo to follow him, and led the way outside. The airfield at Nachi Lolo was strung out between two low ridges. Across the narrow strip of red earth, built tight against the opposite hill, was a long mud and straw building in which the Dragon Eyes lived. Dedman led the way straight to it.

The long room smelled musty with age and in the dim light of the inadequate windows Baldy Feller, whose head had been cooked with gasoline flames in a crackup, and Clyde Hathan were playing cribbage. Copenown, Vance, and Leggett were drinking rice wine and arguing over the relative merits of a P-40 and an Airacobra. When the men saw Captain Dedman and his visitors, they looked up curiously. Mostly they looked at Bhamo, whose handwoven garment resembling an artist's



smock with heavy red braid about the bottom, looked strangely out of place. The hill people seldom migrated so far from their villages

Dedman introduced the men, and told in a few words the story Holden had related. "I'm going to fly over there and check on it," Dedman said. "I'm trusting to you fellows to see that no harm comes to the hospital while I'm gone."

Before the Dragon Eyes could ask any questions, Chingaling, the bowlegged Chinese boy who ran errands for them and worshipped Dedman devoutly, pattered in on his bare feet. Chingaling's face was bleak with terror and he said in his shrill pidgin English:

"Fai-fai, captain—hurry! Much ngu how—very bad. Me find Jung Lee very dead on hill in mulberry bushes. Big knife . . ." and Chingaling slid his small hand across his throat in a very lucid gesture.

They found the body of the old man stripped almost naked, and his leathery throat had been slit with one clean stroke which had prevented an outcry. A grim fury, to which they gave vent with fervent oaths, ran through the Dragon Eyes. Reverently they picked up the old man's body and started down the hill. It was then that hell roared upon them.

They had become so used to the radar

warning them of bombers long before they could arrive near Nachi Lola, that they had become careless. Now they were caught flatfooted as the six Mitsubishi's roared out of the south and came straight for Nachi Lolo. Dedman shouted a warning, and he forgot Craig Holden and Jung Lee.

"We've got to get our ships off before they bomb them!" he cried, his thick legs pumping like piston rods as he charged down the hill. The Dragon Eyes laid Jung Lee's body down and started after Dedman.

DEDMAN scrambled into his own plane and got the huge Cyclone started. He shouted orders at the Chinese ground crew who were jerking chocks from under wheels. A bomb fell to one side of the runway, and Dedman cursed.

He gutted the stick, and it seemed that he jerked the P-40 off the ground with the movement. A Mitsubishi made a strafing run in an attempt to down Dedman before he could get enough altitude to maneuver. But Dedman didn't need altitude. Grimly he flipped the Curtiss on its back, pushed the stick against his leg and even while he turned over, he hosed a burst of cupro into the sleek nose of the Mitsubishi and then slid away as the big bomber wobbled uncertainly and nosed for the ground. The explosion of the Mitsu hurled Dedman up—up—up! He fought the controls and looked back to see that only Clyde Hathan and Vance had got into the air before the Mitsubishi had struck, and that now the runway was blocked, trapping the others.

Three of them against the remaining five bombers! It was not the odds so much as the necessity of downing the bombers quickly that worried Dedman. Then he groaned as he saw a stick of bombs drop straight for the sheds and tents of the exposed hospital. Helplessly, he saw two of the tents disappear in a vast cloud of smoke and earth, and then his fury took possession of him.

He yanked his P-40 around and headed for the Mitsu which had dropped those bombs. He caught the huge, cigar-shaped plane on his rings. The tail gunner of the bomber sent out a frantic stream of bullets which whanged and whimpered about Dedman's head. He didn't hear them. He

didn't smell the acrid stench of tracer whirling in through his punctured coop. He didn't feel the slug which nipped at his arm.

"Now!" he told himself. His bullets smashed into the rear turret, choking off the red tongues of flame from the Jap's guns. His bullets coursed forward along the sleek top of the bomber. They smashed into the cabin and the wing tanks until flame swept out like a banner.

Then Dedman became aware of the two bombers which had ranged themselves above and on either side of him. Their top and side guns were sweeping down on him. In one moment he might be chopped out of the sky. Swiftly he feathered his prop and stalled his Curtiss. He slipped off on his left wing, desperately trying to get into a position to fire his six guns. But the belly gun of the Mitsu followed his maneuver and punched holes in his wing.

Dedman jerked a look above him, and his lip drew tight across his teeth as he saw Vance diving right into the terrible mass of bullets snarling from the Mitsu. Vance was trying to help him, trying to draw the fire of one of the bombers so that Dedman could get away.

Even as he watched, Dedman saw Vance's plane shudder, saw the wing skin peel off the right wing and then a dull rush of fire and smoke enveloped Vance's doomed plane. Dedman felt a prickly numbness grip his body. He closed his eyes, but he couldn't keep them closed. He watched Vance fall like a flaming torch toward the runway of the airfield.

Then another sight drew Dedman's attention. Somebody had started up the bulldozer used for levelling the earth surface of the runway, and at great personal danger was shoving the flaming wreckage of the Mitsubishi off to one side so that the rest of the Dragon Eyes could take off.

DEDMAN had no more time for sights. Another Mitsu was making a run across the hospital, and he slashed his Curtiss around and headed for it. He crippled the bomber and it jettisoned its bombs upon the hill near the mud barracks. Cursing because he had missed a vital spot, he top-ruddered in a vertical and slashed back at the other three bombers.

But there were only two. Some madman was shooting the ack-ack on the ground with such deadly accuracy that one of the four bombers was spinning helplessly for the earth. Dedman's mind was a blur of hateful ghosts. Vance's grinning face, scorched and blackened by fire, leered at him. The wounded of the blasted tents of the hospital screamed at him through the whine of his prop. Craig Holden was to blame for all this. This unreasonable thought was the only clear thing in Dedman's mind.

So absorbed was he in his mental struggle that he was unaware of how close he was to another Mitsu until the steel-jacketed death poured into his cockpit. He felt the dull, painless slugging of bullets. A black shape blurred his eyes and he knew it was too late to fire. All he could do was jump. He aimed his plane for the Mitsu with the throttle wide open. He slid back his coop and hurled his tough, stocky body into the clear.

Even before his chute had opened, he felt the shudder of the crash as his Curtiss smashed into the bomb bay of the Mitsubishi. Then his silk snapped open and as he drifted down he saw Whisper Lord and Cope down destroy another bomber, while the remaining two escaped.

As chance would have it, Dedman landed near the hangar and as he slipped his harness and ran across the bomb-pitted ground the Chinese ground-crew who swarmed about him were but a blur in his eyes. He saw only Craig Holden clearly, standing just in front of the smoking ack-ack gun.

Dedman crouched before Holden, and curses poured from his lips. "Damn you, Holden, I believe you caused this!" he cried.

"You're a liar, Captain," Holden said with difficulty.

Then Dedman struck before he had time to notice the seared blisters on Holden's face. Holden fell back on his rump, but he scrambled up with the grim look of a fighting man who knew he had met his match. He closed in, struck Dedman twice below the heart. But Dedman was beyond himself with fury, and despite the blood which dripped from his sleeve, he struck again and Holden gave ground under the agony of the blow against his scorched face.

The shapeless figure of General Yuong rushed between them, and the Chinese said gently, "You are making a mistake, Captain. A very bad mistake."

"Vance burned!" Dedman snapped as though that should excuse anything he did.

"It was Holden," Yuong went on patiently, "who ran the bulldozer and cleared the field. Holden fired the ack-ack gun and downed one of the bombers. Vance isn't quite dead, Captain. It was Holden who dragged him from his burning plane."

Then Dedman noticed white blisters on Holden's seared face, and something wound tight inside of him and choked off his voice. He stumbled over to where Vance lay stretched out upon the ground. Vance was barely conscious, his eyes closed, and a whimpering sound trembled on his lips at every difficult breath.

Yuong was looking over Dedman's shoulder, and he said grimly, "If only we had drugs! We might save him. . . ."

"We will have drugs," Dedman said flatly, shaking the blood from his hand.

"But you are wounded, *parn yau*," Yuong said gravely.

"Flesh wounds. I shall have them wrapped up," Dedman replied. "Then I am going to Putao, and you're going with me, Holden. If this is a trap, then you will be killed in it!"

Before Holden could reply, two Chinese from the hospital rushed up to General Yuong, crying, "We have found the Japanese spy who killed Jung Lee! He lies dead among the victims in the hospital!"

Yuong said softly, "How can men fight such beasts who turn every instinct for kindness and humanity into means of pursuing their hideous ends? I treat all the wounded as Christians. . . ."

"They're not Christians," Dedman muttered as he helped to lift Vance gently and carry him to the hospital where Dedman might have his own wounds dressed also.

II

BECAUSE he hoped to make the trip for the hidden drugs in one day, Dedman impatiently waited for dawn before starting out. He chose Whisper Lord to go with him; Lord had proved himself on several other occasions.

Lord had had his larynx shot out by a

Nambu bullet months before and now talked with the aid of a home-made sonotone improvised from an old Ford coil and some dry cell batteries. By pressing a vibrator against his throat, he spoke in a wierd monotone. But between Lord and Dedman was a sort of psychic understanding so that Lord did not have to speak often.

They roared off in an old Lockheed 14, and Craig Holden, his blistered face covered with ointment and gauze, crouched at the navigator's table just behind Dedman where he could rush to the rear gun turret in case of attack. Bhamo, needed as a guide, sat behind Lord, playing incessantly upon a small flute which he had produced from the folds of his smock. The music seemed to soothe away his fear of flying.

They roared on toward the distant mountains across the rolling country with its terraced rice fields. Dedman turned his head and spoke loud enough for Craig Holden to hear.

"Which is the closest way to the hidden trucks?"

"The closest way is down the Lawatong Valley, but it is not the safest way. The Japs have anti-aircraft batteries hidden on the jagged peaks. They shot down two American transports flying from Assam to Yunnan," Holden replied.

"So that's why the planes are not getting through," Dedman growled to himself.

"It's near there that the Chinese are building the new road to India. The Japs are watching them, laughing at them, but letting them go ahead because the Japs know that the men and food which are being spent on that road cannot fight against them. When the work, the suffering and the road is complete, they mean to swoop down and take it as a means of entering India from the north," Holden explained, and added, "We had better go around by way of Tzuchien, though it is long and I don't know the road so well."

"Then we shall go down the Lawatong Valley," Dedman said with grim decision, thinking of the suffering at Nachi Lolo. "We'll fly so low the Nip guns can't tag us."

They reached the Salween River where the suspension bridge marked the course of the useless Burma Road, and Dedman headed up the river which twisted like a

snake into the hills. At Tazungdam he took the south fork of the river and the mighty peaks, their snow-clad summits hidden in the eternal mists, rose up about them like walls. When they reached the Tonyi Besi district, Holden's voice clacked over the intercommunication phone:

"That's the Lawatong Valley ahead of us. Hell might pop at any minute. We've got to reach the plateau at the south end where we can make a landing."

DEDMAN watched the ground and the sky like a hawk. Then he saw the Chinese workers below him. They appeared like ants—a vast horde of ants strung out along a trail in search of food. He had seen such a thing once before, during the construction of the Burma Road which was now lost. That the Chinese should so soon undertake a task more difficult was a tribute to their courage greater than any words could speak.

Suddenly Whisper Lord pounded Dedman on the arm, and said in his mechanical voice, "There's a plane below us, Dimples."

Dedman looked down, and saw a Jap Kawanishi outlined against the patches of snow and pine trees. Quickly he spoke through the intercom to Holden:

"There's a Jap plane below us, trailing us. I'm going down and want you to blast him from the sky."

"Don't go down, Captain," Holden warned. "That plane is a decoy, trying to get us to expose ourselves."

"He's got to be stopped, or he'll follow us to the cache," Dedman insisted.

"Wait!" Holden's voice was sharp. "There's a transport plane coming through the pass."

Dedman, remembering the missing transports and relying on Holden's story of how they had been shot down in this very area by the Japs, determined to signal the transport. He turned the Hudson half around so that he could see the huge C-46 transport threading its way through the narrow opening of the Diphuk Pass. Here, the transports must follow a precise course through the sixteen thousand foot pass or crash into the jagged, snow-clad peaks on either side.

Dedman closed his radio switch, and spoke into the transmitter which hung

about his neck. "Lockheed to Commando—Lockheed to Commando. . . ."

Before he could get a response, and give a warning, a strange, deadly thing happened. From a ridge five thousand feet below the summit; from a bank of snow wedged in between two ravines running down from the summit itself; and from a thick growth of pine trees at the end of the ridge, hidden ack-ack guns fired simultaneously. With the first burst, the transport careened wildly as a wingtip collapsed. Then the empennage shed bits of metal and wire and brass, and the huge transport started down out of control.

The deadly effectiveness of the ack-ack fire left Dedman stunned. He realized, dazedly, that the Japs knew just where the transports must emerge from the pass. They had set up their guns at ideal locations and had plotted their fire so that no plane coming through the pass could escape.

Grimly Dedman watched the transport crash upon a snowbank. It skidded, whirled and finally buried itself in the crusted snow. Dedman's first impulse was to dive down and look for survivors, but no sign of life emerged from the wrecked plane. He realized, too, that there was no landing place below him, at least none that he could see.

Dedman looked up to see Whisper Lord's eyes watching him intently and he felt a little ashamed as he said, "We can't stop



now. We've got to get the drugs and rush back to Nachi Lolo. Then we'll come up the river in a boat. . . ."

"But you will never reach them, Captain," Holden's voice said over the phone.

Bhamo's voice added in a rather shrill, high tone, "My Sahib is right, Captain. You had better go for the drugs before it is too late."

All this advice irritated Dedman, and he tried to condone his action by thinking of Vance and the wounded in Yuong's poor hospital. It should not take long to get the drugs and deliver them, then he could act freely. He looked below for the Kawanishi but it was nowhere in sight. Perhaps it had not been following them, after all. Perhaps it had been scouting for the transport.

Soon the plateau lay spread out before them, and Holden's voice over the phone, said, "Head down in that wooded section and land on the road."

"The trees are pretty close on either side of the road," Dedman objected.

"It will hide the plane while we find the truck. There's a steep ravine to the left of the road and on the right the ground under the brush is full of sharp rocks, so we've got to hit the road," Holden insisted.

WITHOUT a word, Dedman nosed down. The earth rushed up at him and he saw that the land was rolling and not flat, and that sharp ravines made ruffles about the edge of the plateau. He swung the Lockheed into the wind, gauged his distance exactly and set down on a long, straight stretch of the old Burma Road.

Dedman was the first one out of the plane, and feeling of his revolver, he looked about warily. The natives of this primitive corner of Burma were not exactly civilized and occasionally sacrificed human beings at their festivals.

The others joined him, and he said, "Let's hurry. Do you think the plane will be safe, Holden?"

"Bhamo will watch it. He knows how to handle the Chin natives."

"Ndyo, sahib. I shall make devil music upon my flute," Bhamo smiled as he put the small instrument to his thin lips and blew weird, plaintive music.

"All right, Holden, it's up to you," Dedman said impatiently.

Holden patted the gauze on his face because his burns itched, and turned toward the ravine on the left. "It was not hard to hide the trucks," he said. "They are closer than you think."

They started off at once, Dedman in the middle and Whisper bringing up the rear. They were all armed, but in this quiet, peaceful spot the arms seemed unnecessary. A half a mile from the road, they climbed down the steep, jagged sides of the ravine.

"We had only to drive the trucks over the edge and the thick brush and trees did the rest," Holden explained, his misshapen fingers rubbing the scar about his throat as though it interfered with his breathing in this high altitude.

They came upon the truck suddenly, where an uprooted pine tree covered it, and Dedman located the drugs almost at once. He felt a deadly thrill of satisfaction at finding them for he knew how much suffering they could prevent. Quickly they separated the cartons of the most needed medical supplies, and Dedman said:

"We'll carry them all to the top of the ravine first. Then we might be able to taxi the plane close enough to load them."

They worked with feverish haste until their lungs screamed for more oxygen than the thin air could supply and even Dedman's tough, thick muscles ached with the effort. Ten trips each they made down the rocky wall of the ravine and back again with a heavy carton upon their shoulders.

At last they stopped to rest and smoke a cigarette, when Whisper Lord said in his mechanical voice, "Listen!"

Dedman tensed. He heard a subdued roaring sound and at first he thought it was the wind which moaned incessantly through the trees. Before he could crouch to his feet, the roar increased suddenly to the proportions of thunder. The pulsing racket of machine guns coughed across the air, and leaping into a clearing Dedman saw the Kawanishi strafing the Lockheed!

"They're after the plane!" he cried desperately, and dragging out his automatic, he started toward the road. He hadn't got a good look at the plane and one thought bothered him. A Kawanashi was a Jap naval plane usually equipped with pontoons. What was it doing here in the mountains?

As though to confirm his thought, the

Kawanashi returned, the floats flashing in the sun, and a bomb floated from its guts and burst with a deadly roar under the right wing of the Lockheed. Dedman felt the fear of defeat picking at his brain, but he kept running wildly toward the plane.

"Bhamo—Bhamo!" he called.

There was no reply and he believed the native had been killed, but when he reached the Lockheed, Bhamo was nowhere to be found. The Kawanishi didn't return, and Dedman turned savagely on Holden. "Are you sure you didn't plan this?"

"You wanted the drugs and I found them for you," Holden retorted, his eyes smouldering. "How was I to know the Japs would jump us?"

"Because I believe your native signalled them," Dedman said flatly, and turned to inspect the plane.

III

DEDMAN found the right wing of the Lockheed badly punctured from bomb fragments, and the aileron had been ripped loose at one hinge. Posting Lord as a lookout, Dedman got Holden to help him fix the aileron. It took two precious hours, and then Dedman discovered that the left engine of the Lockheed had been hit, and the fuel lines and carburetor battered out of shape. One line dripped fuel.

"You two," Dedman told Lord and Holden, "carry what drugs you can back here to the plane. We've got to take off before dark and must take the most necessary drugs with us. Bring ether, morphine, and what sulpho drugs you can find. I'll see what I can do to this mess."

Dedman worked until sweat dripped from his bristly blond head though the air of the high plateau was chill. His flesh wounds burned under the bandages. He kept thinking of Bhamo, and the feeling that the native had helped the Japs persisted. Otherwise, why had Bhamo disappeared?

Lord and Holden stayed away a long time, but Dedman was so busy with his job that he failed to notice the passing of time. He had almost completed the repairs, when he heard a burst of gunfire and threw down his tools to snatch out his revolver. He was about to rush out

in search of Lord and Holden when more gunfire came from the ravine.

He jumped quickly from the wing of the plane, his eyes searching the trees. Then he saw Whisper Lord and Holden running toward him. The squat figures of Japs darted among the trees and their guttural cries rose harshly:

"Ara-ma! Asaaaa!"

"Baka Americajin!"

Bullets whimpered after Lord and Holden, and Dedman, hoping to gain time for the two men to reach the plane, fired his automatic. This only increased the excitement of the Japanese. Lord, who was in front of Holden, turned to fire his gun at the Japs but a bullet struck him and he fell heavily, rolling over with the momentum of his fall. Holden dropped flat beside Lord, and the Nips, seeing their victims within their grasp, charged from the trees.

Dedman cursed, and with a swift movement of his stocky body, wormed his way into the turret of the Lockheed and opened up with the machine guns. His first burst downed three of the Japs, and the others dived for cover. Holden grasped this opportunity and with Whisper Lord across his back, staggered toward the plane. Dedman covered Holden's retreat with the machine gun, keeping the Japs under cover.

The Japs, seeing their victims escaping them, opened up with a light machine gun, but Holden reached the Lockheed without being hit.

"Get him in the plane," Dedman cried to Holden. "Where did the devils come from?"

Holden slid Lord through the door of the plane which was on the opposite side from the Japs. He crawled over Lord, reached the turret, and looking up at Dedman replied:

"We saw them before they saw us, coming along the edge of the plateau. We managed to push the drugs back into the gully before they spotted us."

"How did they get here, with guns and ammunition?" Dedman said grimly.

"They didn't appear to come from the Burma Road," Holden confessed. "They came from the opposite side of the ravine."

"Take over this gun and keep them back," Dedman ordered. "I've just about

got the engine repaired. If we can take off before they rush us. . . ."

Dedman crawled out on the wing and the Nips, evidently aware of what he was doing, turned their fire on him. He managed to keep himself covered behind the engine as his blunt fingers connected the copper tubing which he had mended with tape.

A FLURRY of Jap bullets caused a leak in the main gas line and a blue flame licked up through the hole in the wing. Dedman snuffed it out with his body, and slid back toward the cabin. Whisper Lord looked up at him with agonized eyes from the floor of the cabin, and said:

"I'm all right. Give me your gun."

Lord had lost his gun when he had fallen. Dedman saw the wet smear of blood on Whisper Lord's thigh and his thick lips drew tight. He gave Lord his gun, because starting the plane would require all of his own time.

Dedman slid into the pilot's seat and built up the pressure in the leaky gas line with the wobble pump. He tried the starters and the right engine caught after the first two tries, but the left engine on which he had worked refused to take hold. Then he heard Whisper Lord firing the automatic through the door and looked up.

The Nips, fearful that the plane might escape them, were charging it from two sides. Their shouts of "Banzai!" rose above the roar of the one engine and the chatter of gunfire. Holden in the turret was putting his dwindling ammunition where it would do the most good.

Grimly Dedman fought the stubborn engine. Suddenly it caught unevenly, sputtered, growled for a moment and died. Again he nursed it into life, but it failed to snarl robustly. To take off before the engine had warmed up would endanger their chances for escape. Dedman prayed as the engine gradually took hold. A grim hope filled his big chest and he settled in the bucket to make a rundown the narrow, straight road.

At that moment a Japanese armored car lurched out of the trees ahead of him, and clattered head-on for the Lockheed with its guns snarling flame! Dedman cursed. The Japs didn't aim their shots

at the nose of the bomber, but at the right engine on which Dedman was relying to carry most of the load. A bullet exploded inside the motor ring of the right engine, and it died with a puff of black smoke.

Dedman killed the engines and cried at Holden to stop firing. Lord, realizing why Dedman was giving up the fight, said in his mechanical voice:

"Leave me here, make a run for it."

Dedman swung down, his hands held above his head as he walked boldly to the front of the plane. The soldiers from the trees rushed upon him, jumping like children who are overjoyed by some simple pleasure.

"Americajin bery funny. More funny as Chinese, so? Americajin bery gentle like *ko-hitsuji*, like lamb!"

A short, plump Japanese officer, with heavy spectacles which made his eyes look like marbles in his round face, stepped out of the armored car, and waddled toward Dedman with a Nambu pistol in his hand. His mouth seemed all teeth, and he looked like the caricatures of Japanese generals even to the too-small cap.

"*Tie — baka!*" he silenced the soldiers swiftly. He blinked his eyes on Dedman and snapped, "Tell the rest of your men to come out."

HOLDEN was already walking to the front of the plane with his hands raised. Dedman said, "My other man is badly wounded. He is in the plane."

"Are only san—three?" the Japanese major asked in the tone of a man who disbelieved that three men in their right senses would resist such odds.

Dedman nodded, and the Jap sent a man to look in the plane. The man returned and spoke quickly in Japanese. The major frowned. Then his round stomach stuck out as he straightened his shoulders and he said:

"I am Major Masanori. How did you come here, gentlemen?"

Dedman shrugged, but his quick mind framed a logical reply. "We hoped to avoid the accidents which have happened to the transports going through the Diphuk Pass, so we flew north of Rima. The mountains were too high and we froze up our fuel line. While we were here trying to repair the damage, a plane



bombed us and strafed us.”

Dedman heard a rumbling sound and saw a transport truck coming down the road toward them. He wondered how these men and equipment happened to be in this isolated corner of Burma which was peopled only by a few Chins or Kaws.

“My man in the plane is wounded and needs medical attention,” Dedman said.

“We are not doctors and have no medicine. A Japanese soldier knows but one medicine, one drug. Death. Your friend is alive so there is nothing to worry about. If he should die, he shall have nothing to worry about.”

Masanori gave orders and Dedman’s hands were bound behind him. Other men carried Whisper Lord from the plane to the transport which stood near by. Dedman noticed with grim irony that the truck was a Dodge, perhaps one caught at Lashio. Dedman was herded into the armored car, but Holden was taken to the transport. As Dedman climbed awkwardly into the cramped interior of the armored car without the use of his hands, he thought of Bhamo, and wondered what had become of him. There was only one thing to be thankful for. The Japs had not discovered the cache of drugs.

IV

THE armored car preceded the transport across the plateau and then turned suddenly into a freshly made road on which the earth had hardly become packed.

2—Action Stories—Spring.

It led directly away from the plateau toward an awe-inspiring sweep of mountains, canyons, stark naked cliffs of granite which were stained with splotches of red as though the blood of centuries had leaked from their pores.

The afternoon wore on and at last they came upon a deep cleft which dropped downward all of two thousand feet. Dedman believed they must have reached their destination for it was evidently impossible for anything but a plane to cross that half-mile-wide gulch. The building of a bridge across it would have consumed years and giant machines.

But as they turned a sharp point of rock, Dedman gasped, and his thick hands clenched. Here, then, was the secret of the Japanese encampment at the Diphuk Pass, for before them stretched a natural bridge. The water, thousands of years before had bored through the softer strata when it had formed the ravine, and had left this one rib of rock which spanned the ravine in a perfect arch. It was like the portal to some huge Shangri-la. The Japs had done some work at the approaches. By cribbing up on the sides with pine logs they had built an approach on either end of the rock arch and now the armored car and the transport moved cautiously across it.

Dedman noticed that the two cars remained a good distance apart, and he guessed that the Japs didn’t trust the strength of the bridge. After crossing the bridge, they wound across a rocky summit which was still marked here and there

with snow banks, and at last, just before dark, reached the ridge from which the ack-ack batteries had downed the transport coming through the Diphuk. Above this ridge, the twin peaks marking the Diphuk, towered into the clouds.

A Japanese sentry stepped from some thick brush and challenged them. Masanori spoke quickly and, Dedman thought, a little triumphantly in Japanese, and they were allowed to pass. It was just light enough to see, and Dedman realized they were entering what had once been a Kachin village, the woven-branch huts, plastered with cow dung both inside and out, well hidden under the branches of the trees which grew at the timberline.

Japanese soldiers swarmed from everywhere and Dedman, familiar with Japanese which he spoke after a fashion, knew from their cries that the transport was bringing in mail and supplies.

"*Maki tabako!*"

"*Yubin!*"

"*Budoshu!*"

The Japs were crying for tobacco, mail, and any kind of liquor they might get.

Masanori, eager to display his prisoners, had Dedman and Holden herded at bayonet point toward the largest Koya or cabin of the village. Two other men carried Whisper Lord, who was unable to stand on his shattered leg. Masanori pompously led the procession like a little man who has been ignored by his superiors and is gloating to himself, "I'll show them this time!"

They entered a rather large, sparsely furnished room which was, to Dedman's surprise, lighted by electricity from a portable plant which chugged outside the wall. The floor of packed earth, and the cow-dung-plastered walls of the room were partly covered by the three-by-six-foot straw mats so common in Japan. A hibachi, or small charcoal stove on which brewed the perpetual pot of tea, stood near a hole in the wall which served as a window.

In strange contrast to the rest of the room a modern office desk stood at one end, behind which sat a Japanese Colonel in a creaky oak chair. The Colonel's head was almost totally bald except for a tuft of fuzz at the top. He wore no glasses and his black eyes stared at them from deep holes in his thin, rather kindly face.

He looked very much like a professor.

"What have you here, Major Masanori?" the colonel said slowly.

Masanori strutted before the desk as he spoke swiftly and told of the capture and of the Lockheed disabled on the plateau. "But, Colonel Hoshi," Masanori finished, "there was nothing in the transport."

Hoshi rose on spindly legs, and walked around the desk until he was facing Dedman. "Your name, please."

"I'm Captain Frickert of the Transport Command at Assam," Dedman lied, still hoping to save the drugs so badly needed at Nachi Lolo.

HOSHI smiled a soft, kind smile which didn't match the sharp suspicion of his eyes. "Since when do transports carry nothing? Furthermore, I know your friend," he indicated Holden. "He escaped us some time ago. You couldn't have picked him up in Assam, because he escaped into China."

Dedman heard a subdued groan escape Whisper Lord's lips, and he said tensely, "Before we go any further, Colonel Hoshi, my friend must have his wound dressed."

Hoshi bowed slightly, "A thousand pardons, captain. I have become thoughtless in my old age." Hoshi picked up a sharp knife from the desk, which he evidently used to open letters, and kneeling down, he expertly cut the clothing from about Whisper Lord's wound. As he worked, he explained, "You see, I studied *kusuri* at your own Columbia University years ago, but I found being a soldier more exciting than being an *ishi*—doctor."

Dedman stared at the ragged wound in Lord's thigh around which the red fever of infection was already evident. Hoshi stood up and said, "I would advise amputation at once."

Dedman stiffened at this blunt verdict, and said angrily, "You're crazy! All that wound needs is disinfecting and proper bandages." Dedman had forgotten his own wounds.

Hoshi shrugged. "We have no *kusuri*, no *wganyaku* of any kind. The few drugs we have we must keep for our own men. If you could tell us," he said slyly, "where we might get the proper drugs. . . ."

Suddenly Dedman realized Hoshi sus-

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pected the truth of his trip to the plateau, and meant to use Whisper Lord as a means of torturing the location of the hidden truckload of drugs out of him. It was not a pleasant situation. Dedman could withstand, had withstood the worst tortures the Japs could devise, but to see his friend, for whom he was responsible, suffer hell to save the very drugs needed to save him was another matter.

When Dedman hesitated, Hoshi turned to Masanori. "Where did you capture these stubborn fools?"

Masanori explained, and then added as though the matter was preying on his mind, "You know, Colonel Hoshi, that the Japanese High Command, offers a reward of six-hundred-thousand Chinese dollars for the death of an American Captain. This Captain Flickert is not yet dead, of course, but. . . ."

"*Ara-ma!*" Hoshi snarled, "are you a soldier, Masanori, or a *ginko cho*? The reward is meant for Chinese traitors."

"So sorry," Massanori bowed stiffly.

"Is it true," Hoshi turned to Dedman, "that the drugs are hidden there? If you speak honestly, your friend might save his leg."

But Dedman realized that Lord would die without the drugs, or at best lose his leg. After all, the Japs would go back and search the plateau and might find the drugs, so Dedman acknowledged stiffly,

"The drugs are in the ravine at the left of the road."

Hoshi turned to Masanori and ordered, "Take a patrol at dawn and search for the drugs. And," he added as Masanori turned to go, "don't talk too much about the six-hundred-thousand dollar reward. We might contrive to have some Chinese collect it for us by offering him a cut."

The duplicity of the Japanese mind amused Dedman, but his amusement was short-lived, for a door at the end of the room opened after Masanori had gone out, and into the room came a Japanese officer much taller than ordinary, rapier thin, and with round, gray eyes which suggested some foreign blood.

"Good God!" Dedman muttered in spite of himself. He remembered this man, who moved with the grace of a polished gentleman, very well. He was, or had been Major Nomuja. Now he wore a Lieutenant General's uniform.

"This is Captain Flickert, General," Colonel Hoshi began.

"*Baka*, you fool!" Nomuja smiled thinly through the smoke of his cigarette. "This man is Captain Dedman, the leader of the *Jigoku Niku-ya*—the Hell Butchers who have given Japan more trouble than a division of infantry."

Hoshi stared, goggle-eyed.

DEDMAN caught hold of himself and said calmly, "You were reported to have committed *hara-kari* after the disastrous defeat I tricked Yamakatsu and yourself into, before Chungking, Nomuja."

Nomuja waved his cigarette. "We sensible ones have given up the messy practice of cutting our own guts out over a defeat. It is sweeter to live and exact revenge for the glory of the God Emperor. When Yamakatsu disowned me, they made me a General and stuck me out here in this attic of hell where I could purge myself of my sins. In my wildest hopes I had never believed destiny would deliver you into my hands so easily, Captain Dedman."

"You couldn't be purged of your sins even in the basement of hell," Dedman smiled thinly. "As for my being delivered—it's a C.O.D. consignment."

Nomuja shrugged his immaculately tailored shoulders. "I have a great opportunity here. We Japanese have been so

successful because we wage war against the rules. When we should attack from the sea, we attack from the jungle. We are letting the Chinese build this new road unmolested so that when it is finished we can pour into India from the mountains in the north instead of through the jungle in the south where Lord Louis is prepared to stop us."

"You sound very sure of yourself," Dedman said, straining at the bonds which held his hands behind his back. His wrists were numb.

"This time you shall not interfere," Nomuja said softly, lighting a cigarette and putting it into Dedman's lips. "I shall not kill you at once, because I would like to have you know of my victory, and because there are ways in which you can help me. I have learned that physical torture cannot move you, but I find myself supplied with another weapon."

Nomuja turned toward the figure of Whisper Lord lying half conscious on the floor with the ragged wound in his thigh exposed. Nomuja drew the samurai sword from the glittering scabbard at his side, and deftly inserted the point into Lord's wound, brutally probing the torn flesh.

Dedman felt a prickly anger heat his body. A sigh of pain escaped Lord's lips. Nomuja's back was toward Dedman and in desperation, Dedman catapulted his stocky body forward, his head ducked low.

With jarring force, he drove his head into the small of Nomuja's back. Nomuja let out a grunt of pain as his vertebrae cracked under the impact, and sprawled in a heap against the wall.

Nomuja leaped up before Dedman could recover his balance, and the flat of the sword smacked like a bullet against Dedman's jaw, upsetting him.

"I should have slit your throat!" Nomuja snarled.

Dedman crouched to his knees, and then Holden said sharply, "Don't be a fool, Captain. They could kill us in a minute."

Dedman looked curiously at Holden and said, "Are you afraid to die?"

Holden said nothing, but his crippled fingers were rubbing the blue scar about his throat.

At the sound of the commotion, four Jap guards had burst into the room, and now, at Nomuja's orders, they took hold of Dedman and Holden, and led them away to different prisons while Whisper Lord was left behind to the sadistic mercy of the Japs.

V

BECAUSE of utter exhaustion, Dedman's churning thoughts and quivering nerves succumbed to sleep. When he awoke he found himself imprisoned in one of the cow-dung plastered huts on the very



edge of the granite ledge which swept down to the stream in the jagged canyon below. His hands had been unbound.

Through slits in the wall, he could see the sampans and barges on the river, hauling supplies and food to the swarming army of Chinese peasants who were building a miraculous road with their bare hands. He saw, also, a wharf along the bank of the river on which Japanese soldiers loafed with rifles, and near the far bank of the river, moored to a jetty, was the Kawanishi.

He realized, now, that the big float plane operated from this comparatively smooth stretch of the river, evidently as a scout plane. Through cracks and holes which he poked through the manure on the other side of the hut, he could see the Japanese camp. He realized that it was from this camp, reached only by the road over the natural bridge which he had crossed, that the ack-ack batteries hidden in the hills were supplied.

At the head of the camp, parked on one side of the road, stood a truck loaded with gasoline drums. From the side of the truck, and leading down to the edge of the water, Dedman saw a pipeline and he realized that it was from these drums the Kawanishi seaplane was refueled. He studied the layout of the camp with its wood and manure shacks grouped closely together, and the thick growth of brush and trees which served to hide the camp from any straying airplane. He studied the Kawanishi moored in the river. In his mind grew the semblance of a plan of attack.

He realized that the story Holden had told at Nachi Lolo was entirely true. Surely the Chinese must guess the plot of the Japs to gain control of the road when it was completed. Why, then, did they work with such feverish haste?

A little later another Kawanishi roared over the river and settled at the mooring. Dedman's jaw tightened. It would be impossible to steal both planes for Holden was a truck driver; and Whisper Lord was unable to pilot a plane in his condition. He had not long to wonder what had become of Whisper Lord, because when the sun was well up, Lord was carried to an open shed directly across from Dedman's prison, and left lying on a litter.

Whisper Lord was naked, lying where the sun shone full on his short, bowlegged body. Even at this high altitude with snow still lying in the gullies, the rays of the sun became hot as they beat down upon the rocks. Swarms of insects, activated by the heat, rose from the brush, and flies and mosquitoes soon swarmed upon Lord's open wound.

Dedman paced his prison and cursed. He realized that Lord had been placed there for a purpose. This was all part of Nomuja's plan to break Dedman's will. Then there was a knock on the door, and though Dedman said nothing, the door opened and in came a Jap with a tray of food.

"Here is *tabemono*. Bery nice. You eat," the Jap said, leaving the food and re-treating through the door.

D E D M A N ate because he was hungry, and tried not to look at Lord through the cracks in the manure-plastered wall. When he had finished the food, the door opened again, and Nomuja came in, bowed stiffly in his immaculate uniform, and said: "*Ikaga desu ka?* How are you?"

Dedman squared around, and though his hands were free he made no move toward Nomuja because he saw the snouts of rifles poking through the flimsy wall of the hut.

"Nomuja, the Nips don't appreciate you. Why don't you join the *Yendachi*?" Dedman said sarcastically.

"Because," Nomuja offered Dedman a cigarette from a gold case, "I play for higher stakes than even the *Yendachi*. If I can break the British and American defense of India. . . ."

"It's not a defense," Dedman said evenly, "it's going to be an offensive."

"It shall never develop," Nomuja said quickly, his round, gray eyes like broken steel. "Your friend, who lies in the *kakureba*, yonder, shall have his wound treated when we get the drugs, and if you tell me the strength of the British and American forces on the Burma border, and how they are dispersed."

"Do you think I'm a fool, Nomuja?" Dedman snapped.

Nomuja drew his Samurai sword, and with the point enlarged the hole Dedman had made in the wall of the hut. "Per-

haps," he said, "you have not looked well enough nor long enough. The insects are not very kind to open wounds. But we have left your friend a sharp cleaver with which he might amputate his leg and save the rest of his body."

"You soulless dog! Get out!" Dedman cried, his fists balled into hard knots.

Nomuja bowed his way out, saying, "I see I have come too soon. You have not had time to consider things clearly."

When the sleek Nomuja had gone, Dedman stood trembling with rage, hate, and sympathy for Whisper Lord. How could he let Lord die when he had brought him into this mess? It would be much easier if the wound and the suffering were his own. He knew much about the preparations in Burma because he and General Yuong had been kept informed by radio and messages relayed through India by way of the transports from Assam. It would be useless to lie to Nomuja because the Jap was no fool and must have a pretty good idea of where the offensive must come.

Dedman paced the room like a caged lion. Would it be fair to save Lord at the sacrifices of thousands of troops? He was a soldier and must think like a soldier. Lord would not want to be saved at such a cost.

Late in the afternoon Masanori returned with the truck and Dedman knew they had found the drugs. He had ceased looking at Whisper Lord because the sight unnerved him, and when next he did look, Lord had been moved.

Dedman thought of his plan, but before he could execute it he must escape his prison. To make a bold dash for freedom would mean being shot down like a dog. He had to think of some other way. He was brought more food, and he ate because he had learned from experience that a well-fed man had a better chance in a fight than a hungry one.

Then, at dusk, there was a wild commotion in the camp. He heard Nomuja shouting orders, and cries of, *Shageki yoi!* "*Hyaku!*" "*Mo osoi!*"

THEY WERE cries for action, swift action, and Dedman made ready to charge the door and try to escape in the

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excitement. But just then the door opened quietly, and closed again. In the room stood an old, bent Chinese in the ragged uniform of a general.

"*Ho lo mah*—how are you, captain? I am General Yop Chun, in charge of this miserable road the Chinese are building and which the Japs hope to steal from us. Your friend, Craig Holden, who was here before, has escaped again. Colonel Hoshi has arranged for me to come here and take you down to the river where I am to kill you. I, and Masanori, are to deliver your corpse to the Japanese headquarters in Lashio and collect six hundred thousand Chinese dollars, one hundred thousand of which shall be mine. We must waste no time while Nomuja is busy chasing your friend."

Because Dedman never questioned circumstances which gave him even a slight advantage, he followed Yop Chun out into the gathering night. The guard, evidently bribed by Hoshi, had joined the chase for Holden. With quick, sure steps, Yop Chun led the way down a steep trail which had been chipped from the side of the cliff overlooking the river.

Yop Chun spoke softly as they moved. "I am in constant touch with the allied forces in Burma. They, too, hope to utilize this road to outflank the Japs in Burma. But it is possible the Japs might outguess them unless this infernal camp is destroyed. We Chinese building the road have no arms, and if we had we are only the very old, the very young and the almost useless who are good for nothing but bearing burdens. A hundred Chins of the many who have avoided the Japs and live in this wild country, could do more than the thousands I have under me."

Dedman, curious as to the old Chinese intentions, said nothing. They reached the wharf from which the Japanese sentries had disappeared. Evidently Hoshi, who obviously resented Nomuja's interference in his plans, had taken all precautions. The old general directed Dedman into a rather large sampan which was moored to the dock.

"I cannot move my sampan for another two days. Every four days I am allowed to go down the river as far as Putao to bargain for more rice and provisions," the general said as he stepped into the canoe-

like craft with its center section covered by an awning.

"And where am I to hide?" Dedman asked, more amused than resentful of the old man's strange ways. He had not forgotten that he had been brought down here to die.

"The God's have provided, *dor jear*," the general said and stooping quickly he lifted a section of the floor of the sampan and exposed a dark hole which seemed mysteriously to lead to the bottom of the river.

"Well I'll be damned," Dedman grinned.

"Your friend, Craig Holden, escaped with my help some time ago," the general explained. "I am sorry I cannot offer better quarters, but it is the largest oil drum I could smuggle out of Putao. There are blankets, to soften the steel, and I shall see that you are fed. In case of emergency we can converse through that innocent looking knothole in the awning post."

Before sliding into the hole Dedman looked across the river and even in the almost total darkness he could see the Kawanishis moored there. Then he let himself into the submerged tank which was fastened securely to the bottom of the sampan, and knew he was in the submarine Holden had spoke of. And he had called Holden a liar!

Dedman assumed the most comfortable position possible in the cramped space, and because there was nothing else to do in the utter darkness, he prepared to sleep. Before sleep came, he heard Yop Chun's voice whisper through the tube which led from the knothole in the awning post:

"They have not caught Holden. The guards are back on the wharf."

Dedman whispered back, "What will you tell Colonel Hoshi, when you do not deliver my body?"

"I will tell him that your body slipped into the river and we must wait for it to be washed up," the general chuckled.

VI

Dedman awoke after his first night's sleep in the tank under the sampan and though there was no ventilation in the tank save the tube through which he had talked, he felt refreshed. It was impossible to tell the time of day and he was about to speak into the tube, when he heard

the jangle of voices in argument coming down through the tube.

He waited patiently, careful not to make any disturbance which might reveal his hiding place, and some time later Yop Chun carefully lifted the secret door in the floor of the Sampan and handed down a bucket of rice and boiled fish.

"It is the only food allowed us Chinese," he explained. "The rice comes from the valley along the lower river and the fish we catch in the stream."

"What was the argument I heard?" Dedman asked, taking the bucket from Yop Chun's withered hands.

"Hoshi came, *parn yau*, demanding your body. He is suspicious. He has given me twenty-four hours to produce your body or he threatens to take over my Sampan. He thinks I mean to collect the six hundred thousand Chinese dollars for myself. The Japanese cannot understand honesty."

"That's bad," Dedman frowned. "I had hoped for more time. Has Holden been caught?"

"No. Nomuja is scouring the hills for him, and the river. He is having the rice boats searched."

"I had better duck," Dedman said, "before they sneak up on you, *parn yau*. *Ngar che de kin nay*," he added in Chinese, "I shall see you later."

Dedman slid back to consume his meal in utter darkness. He wanted a cigarette, but he knew the smoke, drifting up through the knothole might give him away. For a long time he lay still, trying to figure out some ending to the strange drama he had become embroiled in. He must act before Hoshi commandeered the sampan, but what could he do alone? True, he had escaped from worse predicaments than this, but now he must think of Whisper Lord.

Perhaps, if Holden had escaped the Japs again, he might return with help, but it was doubtful that Holden could get far in the hills for Dedman had felt the drumming sound of the Kawanishis taking off on the river, and he knew they would be joining the search.

To try and do anything during the daylight would be suicide, but he must act that night regardless of anything. He thought of the gasoline drums and the layout of the camp. Somehow he must rescue Whis-

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per Lord in the final confusion. With his mind thus prepared, he waited impatiently for Yop Chun to whisper down to him through the tube. He dared not make the first call without knowing if it was safe.

In the afternoon, Yop Chun opened the secret door and passed down a bucket of fresh rice and boiled fish in exchange for the empty bucket.

"Ho lo mah—how are you?" he asked softly.

"Ngor goy ho—I am well," Dedman replied. "But I must get out of here tonight. It would be too bad if Hoshi kept his word and took over your sampan. He would kill you for having deceived him with the submerged tank. At midnight, when the camp is quiet, I want to be let out. I have a plan, which, if it succeeds, will destroy the Jap camp, or at least trap the Japs until I can return with the Dragon Eyes Squadron, and destroy them."

"It is a difficult task. We Chinese are not afraid to fight even with our bare hands."

"It will not be necessary. Just keep an eye on the Kawanishi and see if they load it with bombs. . . ."

"It is always loaded with bombs, *parn yau*. You see, when they shoot down an American transport plane enroute from Assam, they send out the Kawanishis just in case there are survivors. There must be no survivors," Yop Chun added significantly.

Dedman ground his teeth. He asked nothing more than to get revenge upon these devils who had trapped him. The hunger for Jap blood began pounding through his pulses and he knew that the hours until midnight must seem like years.

Dedman lay in the dark, reviewing his plan. The first step was to reach the truck of oil drums. He had matches, which the Japs had not taken from him. But he knew the first step would be the hardest. If the guards on the wharf remained alert all night, he must find some way to evade them.

After what seemed an eternity of waiting, Dedman heard Yop Chun's voice whisper through the tube, "It is midnight, but the searching party is still on the bank of the river watching for rice boats. You

can do nothing yet. Perhaps later—near morning."

The eager desire to attack the Japs quivered through Dedman's thick, tough body—tingled even to the tips of his blunt fingers. Because it would make the waiting easier, he forced himself to doze off. He was awakened by the sound of Yop Chun lifting the secret door above the tank.

"It is not yet safe to come out, but it is almost dawn," Yop Chun whispered. "If you are determined to make your attack, it must be done now. *Sich yin la?* Will you have a cigarette, first?"

"Ho, dor jear; yes my friend," Dedman said and gratefully accepted the cigarette which the general had already started for him. "Where are the guards?"

"The Japs who were on the wharf have gone down to the river bank because it is rumored some rice boats are coming up at this early hour, and they must be searched. While the search is going on, you might slip off the wharf," Yop Chun explained.

"Thanks," Dedman said tensely, and finishing the cigarette, he snuffed it out and climbed up to the sampan. Quickly he looked around and felt a pang of misgiving. Though there was no moon in the sky, the vicinity of the dock was lit up by a huge fire of pine logs which the company of Japs on the river had built not only to keep away the bitter cold of the night, but also to reveal any boats trying to pass up the river.

In the red glow of the flames, the trail up the cliff was visible, and Dedman knew he could not climb it without being discovered. He looked across the water, and saw the two Kawanishi biplanes moored to the jetty.

Dedman said to the general, "Contrive to have a small boat here at the wharf to get me over to one of the planes. Also have a man, if you can, hiding on the jetty to cut the plane loose when I get the motor going."

"We have accomplished the impossible many times. These things will be done," the general said gravely.

Suddenly there was a commotion among the squad of soldiers on the bank of the river. One of them cried, "*Fune—fune! Shageki yoi!* Boats, boats—prepare for action!"

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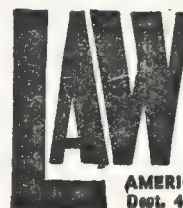
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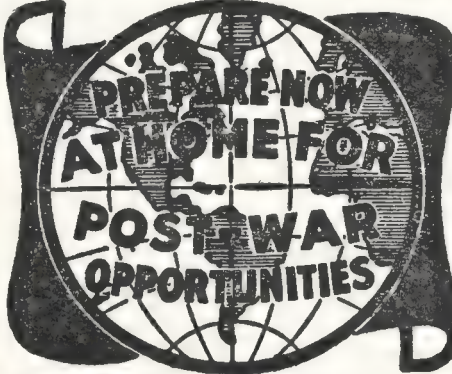
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"This is my chance, while they are inspecting the boats," Dedman growled more to himself than to Yop Chun. He edged over the side of the sampan and crouched on the wharf. He waited until the first of the four boats had been stopped and the three boatmen ordered to pull in toward the shore. A Jap officer reached over from the little ledge of rock which served as a dock, and lifted the tarpaulin with the tip of his sword. Two other Japs grabbed it and swung it back, and then Dedman caught his breath in wonder.

From under the tarpaulin leaped ten Chin natives armed with new rifles, and leading them with his flute in one hand and a rifle in the other, was Bharno! The truth struck home to Dedman with the percussion of a hammer Bharno had escaped into the hills to round up some of his tribesmen. He had found the hidden truck load of guns and ammunition, and now he had returned to help Craig Holden, with whom he had made so many arduous trips over the Burma Road!

The fight began immediately, and Dedman realized that here was an opportunity he must not waste. He darted for the cliff, unnoticed in the excitement. Swiftly he scrambled up—up—up. The whole camp was roused by the gunfire, and a machine gun from a nest on the cliff swept the river bank with bullets.

DEDMAN reached the top of the cliff, and dodged out of the glow from the fire. He felt safer now. He made his way cautiously but swiftly to the gasoline truck. He had rehearsed this plan so many times in his mind, he did no fumbling. He unscrewed the plugs in the high-test petrol drums. Then he lifted the sideboards off the truck and dropped them to the ground. He turned the drums over so that the petrol poured out of the small openings, and then rushed around and released the breaks on the truck, heading it into the road. Just as it started for the camp, he tossed a match into the explosive gasoline!

The effect was instantaneous and more devastating than even Dedman had expected. As the truck, trailing fire, bumped down the road, the burning tanks of gasoline rolled from the bed one after the other. They bounced and careened among

the trees, the brush, the buildings! Fire and smoke seemed to belch from the earth on every side.

Dedman had hoped for more time. He must rescue Whisper Lord before the fire reached the shed in which he believed Lord to be imprisoned. Racing down the opposite side of the road from the fire, he stumbled through the smoke to the side of the shed. Without searching for the door, he tore his way through the manure-plastered wall which was already hot from the flames.

The glow of the fire came in through the door, and Dedman saw that the hut was deserted. He hesitated for only a moment. The smudge from the burning manure tainted the air and choked him. He groped his way outside, and suddenly Hoshi loomed before him in the confusion of the camp. Hoshi's face was a twisted mask of despair and deadly hate. At sight of Dedman he whipped out his Nambu pistol.

"Asaaaaa!" Hoshi hissed, and fired pointblank.

Dedman lunged forward as the gun exploded and the bullet creased his neck. He grabbed the pistol with his powerful hand and twisted it from Hoshi's grasp. Almost with the same movement he rammed the barrel into Hoshi's stomach and pulled the trigger. Then he whipped around, every sense alert as though the sounds of battle were a rhythm to which his thick body reacted mechanically. He found Masanori behind him, swinging a huge club over his head. Dedman's next bullet plowed upward through Masanori's chin and came out the top of his head!

Then another, unmistakable sound thundered above the confusion—the sound of the Kawanishi 95s roaring into life. Dedman stood still, sweat drenching his hard body and his blunt fists clenched. Here, again, he must make one of those deadly decisions which only war could force on a man. He must desert Whisper Lord, or lose the chance of bringing his plot against the Japs to a successful conclusion. He made the grim choice of a soldier though his heart cried against it. Almost without realizing what he was doing, he raced for the cliff, and scrambled down the narrow trail.



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AT THE FOOT of the cliff, he crouched back against the stone. The wharf, where Yop Chun was to have a boat waiting, was alive with surging men. The Chins were still fighting! Across the river, one of the Kawanishis was taking off. The other was moving slowly out into the middle of the stream into position to take off.

With Dedman, decision and action were simultaneous. He darted from the shadow of the cliff, and holding the Nambu in his teeth to keep it dry, he slid into the river.

There was a blast from the Jap biplane and the Kawanishi slid toward him. Dedman backed water, only his face above the yellow surface. Suddenly machine gun bullets kicked up little spouts near him and he jerked a look back to see Nomuja's slim form on the top of the cliff, firing a portable machine gun. Dedman ignored the erratic fire because the Kawanishi was upon him.

As the lower wing swept over him, Dedman grasped the rear float strut and pulled himself upon the float. Without pausing he climbed to the sandboard on the lower wing right beside the open cockpit.

The startled Jap pilot cried, "Tomare!" and beat at Dedman with his fists. Dedman didn't feel the blows. He felt cool as ice, calculated each movement so that victory could not escape him. He took the Nambu from his mouth, and shot the Jap through the neck, while the Kawanishi weaved drunkenly down the stream.

It took but a moment to drag the Jap from the cockpit and drop him into the river, and then Dedman was in the bucket seat, his hand curling lovingly about the joystick. He batted the throttle wide, and lifted the Kawanishi from the river, with water dripping from its float like diamonds. He had counted the bombs in the racks under the lower wings. Six of them—six one hundred pounders. Each bomb must have a purpose!

AT FIRST he couldn't trace the road until far ahead of him he saw a car weaving through the trees, across the shale, and over the snowbanks. So Nomuja was once more hoping to save his precious hide at the expense of his men! A grim surge of joy and hate jarred Ded-

man to the core of his being. Nomuja must not reach the natural bridge first!

Desperately he loosed three of the bombs. They struck the center of the arch and great segments of rock slid off into the chasm below. Still the bridge did not fall, and the truck had passed over it. Fiercely Dedman hurled the Kawanishi into a vertical turn. The bridge must go!

He flew lower this time, loosed two more bombs which exploded near the spot of the first hit. The bridge of stone which had defied the centuries, swayed, shook violently, and then broke off in huge chunks like a long piece of giant macaroni. There was no escape for the Japs left in the camp!

Dedman made a tight turn and headed for the escaping truck. He had one bomb left, one bomb for Nomuja. But as Dedman lined out to destroy the truck, he gasped in dismay. The other Kawanishi had appeared from nowhere. It was diving on the truck, spraying it with bullets. Quickly Dedman realized that the Japs wanted whoever was in the truck, killed. That could mean only one thing. A joyous rumble at the prospects of battle, issued from Dedman's thick chest.

He fired a long burst to attract the Jap pilot's attention from the truck. The nose of the other Kawanishi pulled up and without hesitation, the Jap pilot roared up under Dedman's plane. The Jap, too, could read signs, and he kept his guns firing without pause.

Dedman felt his plane shudder as the bullets tore through the float, snatched swatches from the wings, zinged within inches of his head. Then he grinned fiercely, and nosed down. Straight for the Nip he roared. His thick thumb clamped on the trips. He saw his bullets smash through the propshen of the Kawanishi in front of him. Then the Nakajima engine exploded, tearing the Kawanishi apart.

Dedman held his dive until he was no more than twenty feet above the truck. Hopefully he looked down, and saw Holden's bare head hunched over the wheel. There were bundles in the bed of the truck which Dedman couldn't make out. Then Holden was looking up at him, signalling him, telling him as best he

could that he meant to drive the truck into safe territory. Dedman knew that only a helldriver could do just that.

Dedman acted as escort for the truck, weaving back and forth until Holden had driven down the steep, wooded descent reaching to the lower Salween River. At the bottom of the six thousand foot descent, Dedman landed the float plane on the river near the suspension bridge which the Japs had failed to conquer. He taxied up to the concrete abutment, and climbed up to the road to meet Craig Holden.

HE MET more than Craig Holden. Whisper Lord was lying in the bed of the truck among the boxes of drugs! Dedman felt his voice clog up against the lump of thanksgiving in his throat. He looked quietly into Holden's scorched, exhausted face, and his eyes and the clasp of his hand spoke for him.

Dedman looked tenderly into the face of Whisper Lord, and though Lord could not talk because his voice box had been broken, he grinned back at Dedman, and whispered:

"It takes all kinds of hellions to make a war, Captain."

They transferred Whisper Lord to the rear cockpit of the Kawanishi and piled about him as many of the drugs as they could.

"You can land on the Yangste near Nachi Lolo," Holden said when they had finished. "You and the *Dinghow Salenas* still have a job to do back there in the hills. Bhano and his natives will need some help."

"But what of you, man. You're done in," Dedman objected.

Holden grinned. "If you don't mind, captain, a helldriver never deserts his truck," he said evenly. "I'll be seeing you in Nachi Lolo with the rest of this cargo."

Dedman, thinking of what Holden's brave efforts meant to Vance and the other sufferers in Young's hospital, took from his own breast the bit of red ribbon with which China had honored him and pinned it upon Craig Holden.

"Helldrivers can be heroes, too," he said softly, and saluted before he turned to climb into the Kawanishi.



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